

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION AMONG LOCAL NEWS LOVERS:  
THE EFFECTS OF ANONYMITY AND TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES ON  
DISCOURSE IN NEWSPAPER WEB FORUMS

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Democratic Communication among Local News Lovers:  
The Effects of Anonymity and Technological Affordances on Discourse  
in Newspaper Web Forums

A Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis

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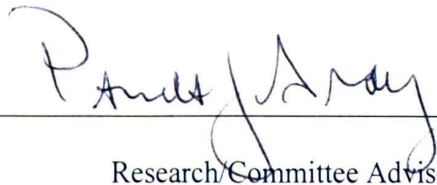
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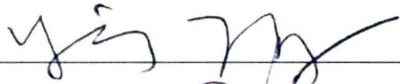
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## ABSTRACT

JANEL SHOUN-SMITH. Democratic Communication among Local News Lovers:  
The Effects of Anonymity and Technological Affordances on Discourse in Newspaper  
Web Forums (Under the direction of DR. PAM GRAY.)

As the Internet has overtaken the traditional format and distribution of newspapers, one way media owners have tried to continue their public sphere role in a digital world is by posting online web forums along with their news stories. Such forums would seem a logical way to spur citizen discussion, but unmoderated online forums historically have not produced deliberative discussion at the levels required to encourage democratic engagement. Newspapers have also observed this result, and thus many are now prohibiting anonymous comments or installing new social media formats to attempt to change the character of the web discourse. This analysis explored whether two technological affordances – anonymity and social network sites (SNS) technology – have a significant effect on the democratic communication within local newspaper-hosted online forums. Web comments on two local newspapers in Tennessee were analyzed and compared for characteristics of three types of democratic communication: liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative. While a healthy amount of deliberation was found on both forums, the results showed that neither technological format had a significant effect on the democratic character of the online discourse, indicating that newspapers' current preferred solutions to negative conversation on their websites may not meet their expectations.

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

Newspapers have long been considered a crucial component of democracy: informing the public and encouraging discussion and deliberation. Theorists of deliberative democracy, which considers public deliberation the essential component of democratic practice, have often cited the media as serving as a public sphere, offering a channel for citizens to participate in deliberation of issues, working toward the common good (Drale, 2004). One of the most obvious examples of this public sphere role seen throughout the centuries is the letter-to-the-editor section in newspapers, what Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) called “the feature in contemporary mass media that most clearly encapsulates ideals of public participation” (p. 121). “Editors express a strong commitment to citizen participation in democracy, coupled with the desire to improve bonds between citizens in local communities and to succeed in the marketplace,” (p. 121) she writes.

So it’s not surprising that newspaper editors and owners would seek to continue this role in the digital age through establishing opportunities for the public to participate in democratic discussion online. This has been achieved largely through online public forums attached to most of the articles posted on the Internet. Using a variety of technological systems, newspapers have allowed the public to submit written comments and respond to others, collecting the comments in “threads” below each article. As reported by Rosenberry (2011), the Project for Excellence in Journalism (now called the Journalism Project) in 2009

found that 31% of a systematic sample of newspapers nationwide included such online public forums. In addition, many newspapers nationwide are now using the online social network Facebook to disseminate their news in a way that they hope will better engage the community (Schulte, 2009). A 2010 study by Greer and Yan showed that Facebook sites associated with community newspapers, with circulations less than 50,000, more than tripled during a five-month period in 2009 and 2010. Just as editors and owners viewed letters-to-the-editor as a public forum, so also they have viewed online web comment sections as an open forum, “an environment where regular folks can feel comfortable expressing their political opinions” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002, p. 130).

Just a few years ago, online forums at news websites were looked on with optimism by journalists. Arianna Huffington, founder and editor of the Huffington Post, a nationally prominent online news aggregator, said in 2010:

It makes the site a two-way experience. People no longer want to passively sit back and be served up information. We now engage with the news, react to the news and share news. News has become something around which we gather, connect and converse. (Landers, 2013, ¶ 18)

But by 2013, Huffington had become disillusioned with the value of such forums, announcing in August that the Huffington Post would no longer allow anonymous comments (Landers, 2013, ¶ 2) in an attempt to rid the site of “trolls,” defined as “nasty anonymous commenters” (¶ 6 ). Huffington was not alone (Rose, 2008). One need only do a Google search to turn up hundreds of articles on newspapers weighing the disadvantages and advantages of anonymous comments on their



websites. A 2012 study by Reader cites calls by Leonard Pitts Jr., Connie Schultz, the *American Journalism Review* and editor Rem Rieder to ban anonymous comments from newspaper sites. Schotz (2007) outlined the typical view of journalists: “Generally, we don’t print anonymous opinions, which are automatically suspect.... With online comments, we do the opposite. We let people hide behind a screen name and hurl insults, which we may or may not scrub from the website” (p. 39). Newspaper editors are not the first people to notice the trend of brutal incivility in online communication. Researchers have been noting “flaming,” harshly worded personal attacks, in various online forums for many years (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Jordan, 2001; Mitra, 1997). There is a large body of research pointing out the weaknesses of the online public forum due to polarization, isolationism and incivility hampering true deliberative discussion (Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2007; Wilhelm, 1999).

In recent years, many newspapers have started to combat such incivility by eliminating pure anonymity in their online forums, as the Huffington Post did, arguing that forcing contributors to stand behind their opinions will produce more civility, more respect and thus more reasoned and deliberative arguments (Landers, 2013; Pérez-Peña, 2010; Rosenberry, 2011). Latching on to the more community-focused nature of social media, many newspapers have partnered with Facebook, requiring readers to comment in their online forums using the Facebook technological format—where identifying oneself by a real name and photo is common and accepted (Pérez-Peña, 2010). Other newspapers have replicated many of social media’s popular community-building features in their

own online forums, such as posting profiles, sending private messages, ranking the best comments or tracking other contributors' posts (Rose, 2008). While media editors have argued strongly that anonymity hinders meaningful discussion, scholarly research into group dynamics and computer-mediated communication has indicated that anonymity can actually benefit deliberative discussion by encouraging people to comment honestly or to comment more often (Reader, 2012; Rosenberry, 2011; Scott, 1999; Scott, 2004).

There has been very little research directly exploring the effect of anonymity on the deliberative value of newspaper online comments specifically (Rosenberry, 2011). This paper intends to compare comments made on two local Tennessee newspapers' web forums: one using the pseudo-anonymous environment of Facebook to allow any reader to comment, and one using an anonymous environment to allow any subscriber to comment. Grounded in Habermas' theory (1989) of the public sphere but applying a more recent theoretical framework by Freelon (2010) which expands the public sphere to include other democratic norms, this paper compares whether the user-identified comments in the Facebook format or the fully anonymous comments in the web forum display more characteristics of Freelon's deliberative, communitarian or liberal individualist norms. There is no doubt that media at-large, and certainly print media, are going through a time of re-definition. Online tools play a major role in that re-definition. If newspapers are to continue to carry out their role as



purveyors of democratic discussion, it is vital to know if technological differences promoting or enhancing anonymity and online community are furthering or hampering that goal.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### *The Internet and Democracy*

While relatively new in the grand scheme of history, online discourse has received quite a bit of attention from researchers since the advent of the Internet (Freelon, 2010). The Internet was recognized early on as a transformative technology in our society (Davis, 1999, p. 4), and researchers have generally fallen into two camps in theorizing how the Internet impacts society for good or ill (Putnam, 2000). On the one hand are those who declared a “brave new virtual community” noting that the Internet enhances our “ability to communicate, thus it seems reasonable to assume that their net effect will be to enhance community” (Putnam, 2000, p. 171). On the other hand are those who said the anonymity of the Internet “inhibits interpersonal collaboration and trust” (p. 176) and the novelty of the Internet will be so enticing it will “crowd out face-to-face ties” (p. 179).

Political online discourse is of particular interest to researchers as many have theorized it could be the spark for mobilizing a new wave of democratic engagement (Hauben & Hauben, 1997). Certainly presidential and other political candidates have made great use of the Internet and social media, believing that online discussion and community will translate into real-world votes (Davis, 1999; Miller, 2008; Williams, Trammel, Postelnicu, Landreville & Martin, 2005). As an example, the national attention received by the grassroots activist group Code Pink after using Twitter and other social media platforms to protest



President George W. Bush at Valerie Plame Wilson's congressional committee hearing showed the power the Internet can put in the hands of a small group working together for a cause (Simone, 2010). Many have pinpointed the Internet as a tool that could truly bring power to the people. "This new medium has been predicted as the beginnings of true direct democracy—a vehicle for enabling common citizens, rather than distant elected representatives, to make ongoing policy decisions" (Davis, 1999, p. 4).

In an effort to quantify the Internet's potential power for democratic engagement, many researchers have chosen to explore online political discourse. A preponderance of these researchers has chosen Habermas' theory of the public sphere as the lens through which to explore the topic (Dahlberg, 2001a; Freelon, 2010; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Papacharissi, 2004; Sunstein, 2007; Wilhelm, 1999). Scholars especially interested in the decline of civic engagement have often looked to Internet-based social practices as a possible way to reverse the trend. Most such scholars have referenced Habermas' work as the theoretical framework for their studies in this arena (Freelon, 2010). Habermas (1989) defined a "public sphere" as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (p. 27) and describes three criteria of a public sphere: (a) an environment where arguments are judged, accepted or rejected based on their "authority" or rationality, rather than the status of the one proposing the argument; (b) an environment where cultural topics—those of concern to the entire public—are discussed by the entire public, not just the elite; and (c) an environment that is inclusive to the whole public (Habermas, 1989). Many deliberative democratic

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theorists have built on Habermas' theory to further define the characteristics of "deliberation" that lead to democratic decisions and actions (Freelon, 2010). Researchers such as Freelon (2012), Stromer-Galley (2007), Tanner (2001), Trice (2011) and Wilhelm (1999) have explored online political discussion using deliberation as the yardstick. Thus Dryzek in 2002 argued that deliberation "is *the* dominant approach in democratic theory" (as cited in Wright & Street, 2007, p. 850).

### *The Internet as a Public Sphere*

In studying online political discourse through the public sphere lens, researchers have once again divided into two camps, similar to those who studied social capital for the Internet overall. Scholars such as Sunstein (2007) and Davis (1999) theorized that online discourse would always be typified by polarization and isolationism and thus not contribute to—and probably even harm—democratic engagement. Researchers such as Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane (2008), Singer (2009), Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, and Jeong (2006) and Wilhelm (1999), backed up this viewpoint, concluding that the political discourse in web forums did not rise to the level of reasoned deliberation and thus did not meet the criteria of a public sphere. On the other side of the debate, are scholars such as Papacharissi (2004) and Dahlberg (2001b), who proposed that the Internet does have the potential to be a public sphere once certain obstacles are overcome. The presence of deliberative discourse within certain web forums and the potential for such deliberation to grow has also been noted in numerous studies (De La Poype &

Sood, 2012; Douai & Nofal, 2012; Freelon, 2012; Milliken, Gibson, O'Donnell & Singer, 2008; and Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2005).

Many early studies, including two by Internet pessimists, Davis (1999) and Wilhelm (1999) studied Usenet groups specifically. Usenet was described by Davis (1999) as “a computer conferencing network allowing any user to read and even post messages on an electronic bulletin board” (p. 150). Usenet began in the 1970s and exploded in the 1990s, offering tens of thousands of newsgroups on a variety of topics from cats to politics. Usenet would seem to be the ideal medium to be classified as a public space, offering open participation and “thoughtful commentary and information on issues,” (Davis, 1999, p. 153). However, Davis found this not to be the case. “A common complaint of Usenet messages is their vitriolic nature,” (Davis, 1999, p. 157) he wrote. In the three newsgroups studied, more than three-fifths of posts included attacks on previous contributors. He also found that political discussion on Usenet lacked external evidence for assertions made. He found that Usenet was unrepresentative, full of flaming and served only to reinforce opinions already held, leading to his conclusion that “the Internet is not an adequate tool for public political involvement” (p. 168). Wilhelm (1999) also studied Usenet newsgroups as well as America Online’s Washington Connection, finding that the bulk of political messages were designed to provide information rather than seek information, fewer than one out of five messages were a direct reply to a previous posting and 70% of messages showed support for the dominant position in the discourse. The two political forums analyzed did not “cultivate nor iterate a public opinion that is the considered judgment of persons



whose preferences have been contested in the course of a public gathering” (Wilhelm, 1999, p. 175).

Studies of the political blogosphere have also produced strong arguments for the negative viewpoint, especially the existence of the polarizing effect outlined by Sunstein (2007). Tremayne et al. (2006) studied blogs related to the Iraq war, specifically how often the bloggers referenced other conservative or liberal bloggers or media information. They found that liberal and conservative blogs existed in two distinct spheres with only some interaction in the middle. Despite the lack of interaction among most liberal and conservative bloggers, the authors were still optimistic in regards to the interaction between some of the bloggers:

Although it is clear that many bloggers on each side choose to isolate themselves by linking only to ideological compatriots and to media supportive of their point of view, there is at least a place in the middle where ideas can be debated and, possibly, positions changed. (Tremayne, et al., 2006, p. 305)

These results were very similar to Adamic and Glance (2005), who found in their study of political blogs prior to the 2004 presidential election that the blogosphere is very divided, with “liberals and conservatives linking primarily within their separate communities, with far fewer cross-links exchanged between them” (p. 14). Hargittai et al. (2008) offered an empirical and qualitative look at conservative and liberal bloggers and found that political commentators are much more likely to engage those with similar views. They found that 91% of blogroll

links went to blogs with similar ideological views, and the vast majority of post links went to sources with similar views. Those links in the study that did lead to sources with an opposing point of view were often links used to point out the fallacy of an opponent's position.

In a different approach, Dahlberg (2001b) reviewed various types of online forums leading him to argue that “the decentralized communications enabled through web publishing, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail lists and chat rooms does seem to provide public spaces for rational-critical discourse” (p. 616). After analyzing several websites designed specifically to promote reasoned deliberation among its users, especially the Minnesota E-Democracy forum called Mn-Politics Discuss, he concluded that “online deliberative spaces may largely be following the course of what Habermas describes as the bourgeois public sphere” (p. 628), but they have been impeded by commercialization of the Internet and the “more populist forms of political participation” (p. 628). Dahlberg suggested ways to overcome these impediments: creating online spaces free from corporate control, increased funding for such spaces, and thoughtful development of deliberative online spaces by democracy advocates. Online forum developers should implement designs to encourage participants to take advantage of the reasoned, civil discourse within a traditional public space by creating a safe environment promoting respectful and sincere discussions, linking political discussion to everyday life and employing user-friendly technology, he suggested. “New deliberative models and technologies need to be developed to attract an online public” (Dahlberg, 2001b, p. 629).

Much scholarly research on various web technologies since that time has shown the potential for, increasing levels of, or various pockets of deliberative online discussion, causing researchers to take a more optimistic view of the Internet growing into a public sphere in the Habermasian tradition. In 2004 Papacharissi took another look at Usenet and found that the majority of messages posted on political newsgroups were civil. He concluded that the Internet did have “potential to revive the public sphere” (p. 259). When online discussion threads did dissolve into impolite and uncivil exchanges, it was frequently toned down by the contributors themselves eventually, and they actually apologized to each other for their impoliteness. Encouraging “universal access, a wider range of topics and conversation specifically aimed at political action” (p. 281) would bring online forums closer to the Habermasian public sphere ideal, suggested Papacharissi. Stromer-Galley and Martinson (2005) looked at whether political discourse online in topical chat rooms was any more or less coherent than online discussions of cancer support, entertainment and auto racing. They found that political talk did indeed have the highest percentage of messages that were on topic and semantically connected (79%). Deliberative political discussion did seem feasible with chat technologies, at least in the sense that the discourse was fairly coherent, that people did use resources, such as using the name of the person to whom they are speaking to improve coherence, and that people could and did choose to talk on the topic established for the room (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2005, p. 22).

Milliken et al. (2008) found that videos and comments on YouTube, a hosting site for user-generated online videos, had the potential to contribute to a



virtual public sphere as: (a) More than half of the contributors said they visited the site several times a week or more; (b) 78.9% of these frequent visitors had posted a video or a comment; (c) More than 96% of the contributors surveyed said they talked about YouTube videos to other people; (d) Three-quarters of the comments used correct English grammar; and (e) Profanity appeared in less than one-tenth of comments. Zhou, Chan, and Peng (2008) analyzed the contents of posts on public affairs forums on Dayoo.com, a website affiliated with the *Guangzhou Daily* in China. They found that contributors became more active in online discussion over a five-year period and that “a political public sphere in Chinese cyberspace is emerging at the incipient stage” (Abstract). Most recently, Douai and Nofal (2012) concluded that commenting features on the online news sites of Al Jazeera television and Al Arabiya “constitute a genuinely democratic space for dialogue among different members of the Arab public” (p. 279), noting that “the comments’ language and tenor reflect a greater degree of openness, spontaneity and lesser control, aspects remarkably absent from political life in the Arab world” (p. 279).

Some of the most recent research of online political discourse has followed Dahlberg’s lead and turned attention to websites designed with the express purpose to create deliberative discussion to produce democratic engagement. Dahlberg (2001b) mapped out various web forums created by democratically motivated citizens to expand online debate: the Canadian ECommons project, Britain’s Democr@cy Forum and CivicExchange. He specifically outlined how the Minnesota E-democracy initiative, established in

1994, was able to overcome the limitations of most other online forums through the use of e-mail lists, formal rules and guidelines and management (not moderation) of the forum to become an online public sphere. Iyengar, Luskin and Fishkin (2004) created and analyzed an online deliberative poll, which brought together representative samples of people to discuss issues online through synchronous voice-based software, thus providing a semblance of face-to-face interaction. Some participants were given Internet access to ensure equal representation of all class groups on the site. The authors found that online deliberation enhanced the participants' knowledge of presidential candidates and their policy positions. Kriplean, Morgan, Freelon, Borning, and Bennett (2012) analyzed the web platform ConsiderIt, a web forum deployed prior to a state election to encourage residents to deliberate on nine state ballot measures. Their analysis of the site showed that contributors often crafted positions that recognized both pros and cons and recognized points written by people they disagreed with.

### *Expanding the Public Sphere Theory in a Digital Age*

Given this bipolar record of research, some scholars have argued that deliberation alone may not be the best democratic norm to judge whether online public spaces hosting political discourse can be classified as a Habermasian public sphere or even that the bourgeois public sphere itself is not the best lens through which to view online discourse. Freelon (2012) argued that by using “a single norm as an evaluative yardstick” (p. 8) scholars have tended to focus on specific communication behaviors—usually those that fall short of the ideal—and

neglect other types of communication behaviors going on in the same interaction. “The resulting theoretical stories in turn focus on what these forums fail to do—that is, attain the deliberative ideal—rather than on what they actually do” (Freelon, 2012, p. 8). Thus many researchers have ended up labeling online political forums as “democratic failures,” without considering what other democratic norms may be evidenced in the forum. There are plenty of other democratic norms to be considered. Drale (1996) outlined four models of democratic theory (but notes there are many more that she could have focused on): (a) the market model of liberal democracy, with a focus on competing individual interests; (b) deliberative democracy, with a focus on common interests; (c) communitarian democracy, with a focus on the common values of society and their outcomes; and (d) activist democracy, with a focus on establishing common values through action originating outside the existing system.

Many researchers have noted that the ideal Habermasian public sphere has never been, nor is highly likely to be, actually used widely in day-to-day democracy due to the difficult logistics of so many voices coming together in one place and the general inability to force them into a rational, civil discussion (Freelon, 2010; Mutz, 2006; Schudson, 1997). This is one reason why researchers have expressed such optimism that online web discussion can bring the public sphere to realization, because it can overcome such logistical issues (Hauben & Hauben, 1997; Mutz, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002; Wright & Street, 2007). However, others have discounted the entire justification for Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere as the premier model for democratic discourse at all, and especially in



regards to online discussion. Fraser (1990) and Dahlgren (2005) argued against applying the Habermas bourgeois public sphere to the world of online discourse at all. Drawing heavily on revisionist historical research—primarily feminist research and studies of economic class—Fraser (1990) argued that in today's stratified society Habermas' ideal of a fully accessible designated space for discourse, kept free from the effects of inequality, can never be truly realized. Therefore, subordinate groups were and always will be less able to defend their interests. Further, Habermas' ideals of one encompassing public sphere and the elimination of discussion involving private interests, would further serve to minimize subordinate counterpublics (e.g. feminists or African Americans) who may have very legitimate concerns and arguments beneficial to the common good. Fraser (1990) introduced the idea that multiple publics spheres can be a good thing, citing the abolitionists and the feminist movement as two examples of "subaltern counterpublics" which used an array of mediums and political activities to change the definition of a public issue (e.g. slavery and domestic abuse) and to include that issue within the parameters of the discussion of the common good for society. Multiple public spheres provide a space where counterpublics can learn to "articulate and defend their interests in the comprehensive public sphere" (Fraser, 1990, p. 66), she argued. For good or ill, cyberspace today is full of spaces where publics counter to the mainstream discuss their points of view within their own like-minded spheres (Hargattai et al., 2008; Sunstein, 2007). Whereas many in the past may have considered such spaces to be non-deliberative, other theorists have embraced the idea of an

Internet made up of multiple mini-public spaces, encompassing less diversity of opinion but making up the whole of a common virtual space (Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Freelon, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002; Simone, 2010). Even Habermas (1996) in his later work presented the structure of the public sphere as a network where multiple streams of communication coalesce into public opinions. Simone (2010) described how online public forums can be used as enclave spaces or nodes within a public sphere network. Each node is often deliberative within its own boundaries, serving to allow the subaltern publics to “develop discourses before sharing them with other publics and risking rejection” (p. 123).

Dahlgren (2005) noted that Habermas’ “rationalist bias tends to discount a wide array of communicative modes that can be of importance for democracy, including the affective, the poetic, the humorous, the ironic, and so forth” (p. 156). Framed within his own theory of civic culture, viewing citizens as social agents, Dahlgren’s (2005) argument was that while online political discussion often fell short of the deliberative ideal, the Internet was providing a way for “engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics” (p. 160). Dahlgren wrote, “What is more important in this context is that talk among citizens is the catalyst for the civic cultures that are fueling this engagement” (p. 160). Papacharissi (2004) argued that even the more heated discussion in cyberspace could promote democracy according to Lyotard’s theory of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy. Dahlberg (2007) argued that contestation is a “normative requirement for advancing the public sphere” (p. 836), and Winsvold (2013) suggested that online discourse can be

evaluated according to a competitive democratic ideal, in which the goal is to convince the reading audience—not necessarily the participants—of one’s own viewpoint. Thus, discussions in this vein would “elucidate disagreement” and be “a fight between two fixed opinions” (p. 6).

In her 2006 exploration of the dichotomy between deliberative democracy and participatory democracy, Mutz urged researchers to consider the value of both heterogeneous and homogeneous social interaction. She found through analyzing surveys on social networks from 1992 to 2000 that while a traditional public sphere with a diversity of opinions and rational arguments may indeed produce a more tolerant, representative democracy, it does very little to encourage enthusiastic participation in the political process. Those who are most active in political activities are surrounded by those who agree with their political views. In fact, Americans are inhibited from discussing politics with those who disagree with them, she wrote. So while public spheres with diversity of ideas are certainly needed to further democracy, she argued, homogeneous discussion spaces and activities should not be discredited as non-deliberative, as they are critical to mobilizing the most engaged citizens in the political processes (Mutz, 2006).

While many scholars have noted the existence of multiple public spheres in cyberspace, few have made concrete suggestions as to how to analyze them, especially when they appear within the same online forum (Freelon, 2010). As pure deliberation is “rarely discovered intact in the field” (p. 1174), Freelon’s goal was to develop a system allowing researchers to address the “the existing political culture(s) they discover” (Freelon, 2012, p. 140), rather than just focusing on



deliberation and discounting all the other communication styles presented as not democratic (Freelon, 2012). To do so, Freelon turned to the idea of democratic norms, “distinct sets of democratic practices and goals” (Freelon, 2012, p. 7) that political theorists use to “define preferable, acceptable and forbidden actions” (p. 7). By noting political talk that falls within a particular democratic norm, we can better understand “exactly what kind of politics a particular medium is being used for” (p. 2). Freelon’s three models were derived heavily from Dahlberg (2001a), who outlined three broad categories of Internet “rhetorics and practices” (p. 158) based on three democratic norms: liberal individualism, communitarianism and deliberative. After conducting a review of the full body of research of online political discussion (Freelon, 2010), including Dahlberg, and examining the operational techniques used in these works, Freelon proposed a new conceptual framework to analyze online political discourse within a multi-public sphere context. His three models of online democratic communication are also called liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative. Communication that displays the characteristics outlined in each model is considered an outgrowth of the underlying goals of each corresponding democratic norm.

Dahlberg (2001a) used the term “liberal individualist” to refer to “all those democratic traditions which posit the individual as a rational, autonomous subject who knows and can express their own interests” (p. 160). This democratic conception accepts “a competitive political world in which democracy is ensured when individual freedom of expression... is maximized” (p. 160). Therefore, Freelon’s (2010) liberal individualist model is primarily concerned with

individual interests and thus displays primarily one-way communication and personal expression. Characteristics of this type of democratic communication could include monologues, personal narratives, visual or aural content created by participants and flaming often involving profanity or antagonizing language. A monologue is a message not directed to another specific contributor and thus showing an interest primarily “in being heard, rather than in listening or holding a reciprocal dialogue” (Freelon, 2012, p. 96). An example of a monologue found in Freelon’s work would be “<jpfann> Stop boring us with this stupid issue!” (p. 97).

To develop his communitarian model, Freelon drew heavily from Fraser (1990) who argued that communitarian public spaces with little disagreement are valuable as training grounds for counterpublics to develop their messages and strategies to influence wider publics. Mutz (2006) also influenced Freelon’s model with her argument that political insularity is actually the best way to promote political action among citizens. Freelon’s (2010) communitarian model is primarily concerned with the reinforcing and establishing of community ties and thus displays primarily group interaction and a collective identity. Characteristics of this type of democratic communication could include the absence of disagreement, the use of collective pronouns such as “we,” calls to mobilize (e.g. “Ask @SenatorRied to pass the #dreamact now!” [Freelon, 2012, p. 94]) and reciprocal communication among agreeing contributors (Freelon, 2010). An example of what Freelon calls an intra-ideological acknowledgment (Freelon, 2012) follows:

<StucknSeattle> ULC – My point exactly. Congress has the power to make laws but do they have the power to give others the power to create laws. That is what they have done and congress may become irrelevant. Not trying to argue but just putting it out there for discussion [sic] (p. 91).

Freelon drew from Wilhelm (1999) and Stromer-Galley (2007), among others, to develop his deliberative model, which follows the classical definition of a public sphere and displays primarily rational-critical argument, diversity of arguments and civility (Freelon, 2010). Wilhelm (1999) defined deliberation as “subjecting one’s opinions to the light of day for validation, in other words, to debate, discussion and persuasion” (p. 158). He measured deliberation in his study in three ways: the extent to which participants provided ideas and information rather than seeking information, the extent to which participants exchanged opinions and responded to others’ viewpoints, and the in-group homogeneity of political opinion. Stromer-Galley (2007) defines deliberation as “a process whereby groups of people, often ordinary citizens, engage in reasoned opinion expression on a social or political issue in an attempt to identify solutions to a common problem and to evaluate those solutions” (p. 3). Stromer-Galley measured six elements of deliberation: reasoned opinion expression, references to external sources, exposure to diverse perspectives, equal levels of participation, coherence and engagement among participants. In Freelon’s (2010) model, characteristics of deliberative communication could include “logical, methodical appeals to the common good” (p. 1181), political talk with a public issue focus, a



low amount of digression, a lack of ad hominem attacks, and reciprocal communication among disagreeing contributors. The example below displays what Freelon calls an inter-ideological question and an inter-ideological justification (Freelon 2012):

<51> Since when is I-1098 mostly about minimal tax decreases, Mr. Harris? The important thing is the huge increase in revenue for our schools and health care by just asking our most well-off individuals to start acting like citizens instead of princes. Vary widely? Maybe, but they pay only 2.6% of income now, so there is minimal downside risk (p. 95).

Freelon used his proposed framework in his 2012 dissertation, comparing the online political discourse in Twitter hashtag sites, national and metropolitan newspaper-hosted online forums and The Living Voters Guide, an online forum (developed using the ConsiderIt web platform) to help voters consider state ballot measures prior to an election. Using his three models, Freelon hypothesized that the Twitter hashtag sites would display primarily communitarian characteristics, the newspaper web forum would display primarily liberal individualist characteristics, and The Living Voters Guide would display primarily deliberative characteristics. He found that, in general, each web platform conformed to his expectations with two exceptions: The Living Voters Guide did not show as much interaction as expected and newspaper web forums displayed not only high numbers on the liberal individualist metrics, but also high numbers on the deliberative metrics. This led Freelon to declare discussion on the newspaper web forum to show “deliberative individualism.”

At least one study has used Freelon's models of democratic communication to analyze online discourse. Gerwin's 2011 master's thesis examined the political discussion on two Facebook pages set up for proponents and opponents of a local civic project in Stuttgart, Germany. Using ethnographic, qualitative and quantitative methods, Gerwin found that the two Facebook pages—one for supporters of a proposed underground train station and one for the opposition—both displayed all the defining characteristics of a public sphere except interactive debate. As both suffered from a lack of reciprocity, they could not be categorized as deliberative, but Gerwin argued that because many of the posts on both pages linked to media stories both for and against the project, the contributors were well aware of both sides of the argument. They chose, however, to keep the discussion closed and one-sided. Using Freelon's model, Gerwin classified both pages as communitarian, as they both displayed ideological homophily, lack of opposing views and group identification.

### *Discourse Architecture*

In addition to suggesting a shift in the democratic norm, Freelon (2012) also argued that most researchers in the past have made conclusions about the deliberative nature of the Internet as a whole by measuring the online discourse on a particular website. "The term 'the Internet' refers to too many divergent subsystems for broad normative statements to apply faithfully to them all, or even to a significant majority thereof" (p. 10). This argument leads to the discussion of discourse architecture, a theory that fully embraces the notion that online deliberative discourse can be strong or weak on any particular website based on

how the site is designed. As described by Sack (2005), discourse architecture is “the practice of designing environments to connect people to people through networked computers” (p. 243). Discourse architecture is the act of using art and design to implement computer network technologies for discourse that can “shape the conversation that takes place within a given system” (p. 243). Physical spaces have encouraged some types of activities and discouraged others by their very design; so have “system architectures,” argued Sack. Jones and Rafaeli (2000) argued that researchers had not looked enough at how discourse architecture “can both enable and constrain the growth of a collaborative system’s user population and participation” (Abstract).

Wright and Street (2007) noted that many studies of online political discourse up to that time analyzed “a particular form of (typically unmoderated) discussion board known as Usenet, not linked formally to government and with a vast arrangement of often highly politicized and polarized threads” (p. 853). “The way in which the debates are framed... through the design of the interface, may generate the polarization discovered by Wilhelm and Davis” (p. 853). The authors then conducted an analysis of the European Union’s online forum Futurum, replicating the methodology of Wilhelm. The technological differences between the two web platforms were: (a) Futurum was pre-moderated and Usenet was not; (b) Futurum had designated rules on what content was acceptable; (c) Futurum arranged comments in “threads”; and (d) Futurum had a clear institutional context (linked to the government). Wilhelm (1999) developed a classification system to categorize messages as providing information, seeking information, replying to a



message or planting a seed for discussion. He found a large majority of messages providing information and thus concluded that the reciprocity needed for deliberative discussion was not present in Usenet. In *Futurum*, however, Wright and Street (2007) found almost no messages providing information only. The forum was highly interactive with the bulk of messages classified as replies and with 75% of messages providing some type of grounding for their position. The authors concluded that the technological affordance of pre-moderation of the forum kept the posted messages related to the subject and produced a more respectful atmosphere. In addition, the thread format for comments encouraged replies among contributors.

Freelon (2012) applied discourse architecture to argue that one type of web platform may be capable of hosting a deliberative public sphere while another may not due to the differences in the technological features of each platform. “The choice of technologies matters in terms of social consequence, because technologies render particular outcomes more or less likely,” (p. 50) he wrote. He defined technological affordances as the “technological characteristics that enable, constrain, facilitate and discourage various types of political action” (p. 52). In his analysis of the Living Voters Guide, a web forum to help Washington state voters decide how to vote on 2010 state ballot measures, he outlined three technological affordances the website used to create a deliberative environment: (a) The conversation spaces were organized by issue and they juxtaposed supporting and opposing views on that issue; (b) Users were specifically asked to submit “arguments,” not “general comments;” and (c) Users

could add their favorite arguments to their personal page. Kriplean et al. (2012) analysis of the site showed that contributors did craft rational positions and they did recognize points written by people they disagreed with.

### *The Potential Effects of Anonymity*

One technological affordance that has been infrequently studied so far in online discourse is anonymity. While journalists are practically unanimous in their blame of anonymity for the negativity that media-hosted web forums have become known for (Rieder, 2010), the scholarly record is far more muddled, showing strong evidence for both positive and negative consequences of anonymity in computer-mediated communication. Anonymity is defined as “the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source is unknown and unspecified” (Anonymous, 1998, p. 387). The author went on to classify several types of anonymity including discursive anonymity, “in which specific comments cannot be attributed to a specific individual source” (p. 388). There is no shortage of researchers referring to anonymity as the cause of flaming in online discourse (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Papacharissi, 2004; Scott, 1999). This line of thinking is largely grounded in the deindividuation theory, stating that “anonymity results in less awareness of self, and consequently leads to more disinhibited behavior” (Scott, 2004, p. 385). Scott noted that anonymity has been charged with causing such negative online behavior as “cybersmearing,” and Stein (2003) referred to arguments that anonymity can actually undermine public debate as an anonymous source lacks accountability and thus lacks reliability.

Despite such negative consequences, there are plenty of theorists—and the American public at-large—who have stated they believe the advantages of anonymity are worth risking the negative side effects. Scott (2004) noted that anonymity is historically viewed as a basic right of free speech, and surveys (Rosenberry, 2011) have shown that even while a majority of contributors in newspaper-hosted online forums consider anonymity to produce negative comments and that those comments get in the way of productive discussion, they also overwhelmingly support such forums remaining anonymous, as they promote livelier conversation and free expression. Scott (2004) argued that anonymity could even help promote the creation of an ideal Habermasian public sphere by advancing equal participation among participants and freeing them to ask any question, make any challenge and any claim. In 1999, Scott found in a study of computerized group decision-making that anonymity did produce more participation among the group.

However, while the public and some democratic theorists may swear by anonymity, there is some indication in the research record that it produces less than desirable communication outcomes. Rains (2007) found in his study of computerized group decision-making that group members rated anonymous message senders with lower levels of trustworthiness, persuasiveness and goodwill. Scott's 1999 study found lower group identification among discursively anonymous group members, which could be of concern as according to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), the lower the social identity of the group, the less likely participants are to adhere to group norms of discussion.



These results should be tempered by Rains and Scott's 2007 theoretical model of receiver responses to anonymous communication, where they proposed that a receiver's positive or negative response to anonymous messages depends on the context in which it was presented and the receiver's desire to identify the source. Rains and Scott (2007) noted that an online public forum (specifically an electronic bulletin board) was a situation where "a receiver's desire and potential ability to know the source's identity are low," so that "he or she may respond more positively to an anonymous source" (p. 79). They also theorized that the content of the message could affect the receiver's response, with a reinforcing, positive message being received positively and a critical, negative message (such as flaming) received negatively, despite any concerns about the trustworthiness of the anonymous source. Such content is certainly abundant in the extreme in cyberspace discussions today and given the like-minded environment found in many political online discussion venues, extreme reinforcing messages may be one reason contributors value anonymity so highly.

So what is one to make of such a mixed record for the advantages and disadvantages of anonymity? Does it enhance or harm productive communication? Perhaps the most relevant question comes from Scott (2004), "The challenge then is how to provide for the benefits of online anonymity (which center largely on the rights of free speech) without its drawbacks (which tend to focus heavily on issues of accountability)" (p. 133). Obviously this conundrum is of great interest to today's journalists and media owners, who are actively working to find ways to enhance civility on their existing web forums. A worthy

goal, as civility is generally considered a necessary component of deliberative discussion. According to Papacharissi (2004), Habermas valued “well-behaved” discussion and his proponents have argued that “discussion of civic matters is enhanced by courteous turn-taking and a well-mannered demeanor” (p. 266). More recently, Hurrell (2005) found that norms of civil discourse “helped to promote understanding and consensus-building” (p. 633). Since one of the chief methods the media is currently employing to boost civility is to incorporate more aspects of social media, specifically the format of Facebook, it is valuable to look at how anonymity and political discourse on Facebook pages have been examined.

Before addressing Facebook, however, it would be beneficial to address how anonymity affects discourse in traditional, anonymous web forums hosted by newspapers. Unfortunately, there seem to be few studies on this subject; this researcher found only one. Choi and Young (2010) analyzed online comments on the *New York Times* Reader’s Comments section and *The Washington Post* for cognitive-process and affective-process language use, positing that the deindividuation effects of anonymity should produce lower quality language in the anonymous comments. They found this not to be the case, with anonymous contributors using more cognitive-process words and fewer affective-process words. However, when the topics grew more controversial in nature, the anonymous contributors did use more negative affective words, indicating a more emotional and assertive tone in arguing their point. Choi and Young concluded that such assertiveness was possibly fueled by anonymity.

In the grand scheme of Internet history, Facebook is still quite new. However, there have been studies of discourse on Facebook that relate to the goals of this paper. Facebook is a social network site (SNS), defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other contributors with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

Facebook, established in 2004, is the largest online social network (Wortham & Goel, 2013) and boasted 1.2 billion monthly active users worldwide and 142 million daily active users in the U.S. and Canada as of the third quarter of 2013 (Albergotti, 2013). Promoting political discussion is not its primary function, however, its format and popularity certainly make political discussion possible and more accessible than ever before. So Kushin and Kitchener (2009) focused their study on exploring if political discussion between those who disagree was happening on Facebook at all and what characteristics did that discourse display. They conducted a discourse analysis of political discussion on a Facebook page devoted to discussing U.S. policies regarding torture. The page was established specifically for those who oppose the use of torture, however the authors still found that 17% of the total contributors were in opposition to the group ideology and 10% were neutral on the subject. The majority of contributors were like-minded, but there was an indication of interaction with disagreeing



contributors. They also found that 75% of the overall posts on the page were civil comments. “Given that personal attacks were relatively few and civil behavior was fairly prominent, we can infer that the presence of identity attributes within the Facebook discussion may have a positive impact on the nature of online political discussion” (Discussion section, ¶ 6). Halpern and Gibbs (2013) examined comments in two social media channels managed by the White House that differed in their identification formats: a Facebook page (with identified contributors) and a YouTube page (with anonymous contributors). The authors found that their predictions, based on the SIDE theory, were supported as Facebook produced fewer impolite comments than the YouTube site. Similar to Choi and Young’s (2010) findings, Halpern and Gibbs (2013) found that “highly sensitive threads” produced more impolite comments, but they also found those posts presented more justifications to support their claims than in non-controversial threads. In general, scholarly exploration into political discussion on Facebook has found an increase in civility, but has found that classical deliberation is still rare, suffering from a lack of reciprocity (Gerwin, 2011) and in some cases a lack of rational-critical arguments (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). “They do not seem to elaborate very complex arguments to deliberate in social media.... although discussants are not using social media to ‘attack’ other citizens, most of them are not debating rationally or deeply in this media” (p. 1166) wrote Halpern and Gibbs.

## CHAPTER III

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

This analysis applies Freelon's (2010) conceptual framework of democratic communication to classify online discourse in two web forums hosted by local newspapers in Tennessee: *The Tennessean* in Nashville and *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis. Before hypothesizing about the types of democratic communication that may predominate within these two forums, it is necessary to first answer some preliminary questions about the forums themselves. First, by definition, deliberation occurs within a public sphere, thus it is important to know upfront if the web forums of local newspapers can in fact be considered a public sphere? Second, it is important to know if these two forums, despite their difference in technological affordances—namely anonymity and source identity—are both capable of hosting deliberative discussion? Finally, in order to apply Freelon's model, which incorporates democratic norms beyond deliberation, it is important to know if the forums are capable of hosting other types of discourse as well. These preliminary concerns led to the following four research questions:

RQ1 -- Can local newspaper web forums serve as public spheres for democratic discussion?

RQ2 – Can local newspapers with anonymous web forums, such as *The Commercial Appeal*, host deliberative discussion?

RQ3 – Can local newspapers using the Facebook third-party application for source identification, such as *The Tennessean*, host deliberative discussion?

RQ4 – Can local newspaper web forums host other types of democratic communication besides deliberative?

Taking Habermas' (1989) three criteria of a public sphere, online discussion forums hosted by local newspapers would appear, on their face, to meet these criteria. As participants generally do not know each other face-to-face and are conversing in a pseudo-anonymous environment, their arguments would tend to be judged on their face value, as opposed to being judged by the status of the contributor. As newspapers and their web forum are open for anyone of any social class to subscribe or, in the case of *The Tennessean*, to participate for free, cultural topics of concern are available for discussion by the entire public, not just the elite. Wilhelm (1999) explores five characteristics of a public space: (a) It must be a space where people come together to discuss issues, (b) It must host diverse discussion of issues that citizens believe need to be addressed by government, (c) the space should be inclusive and allow everybody the opportunity to deliberate, (d) the space must be intentionally designed to facilitate discussion, and (e) finally deliberation must occur in the public space. The first four characteristics would also seem to fit local newspaper's online forums, which are designed specifically for the public at-large to discuss the issues of civic concern raised by the newspaper.

So that leaves the discussion of deliberation, the most complex requirement for a public sphere and the aspect that is the subject of the most



research by scholars. Considering the primary role mass media has played in promoting democracy through the centuries, it is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little study of the deliberative nature of online discourse on newspaper web forums. The few that have been done mirror the findings of Freelon in his 2012 dissertation and previous work showing that deliberation is present but is mixed in with large doses of incivility and non-interactive monologues.

Trice (2011) examined 206 comment fields relating to 11 articles on six web forums hosted by local, national and global news providers. The majority of comments were found to include references to content in the related article (85.92%) and complex arguments (multiple sentences or semi-colons) (88.83%). Interaction, however, was quite low with only 9.7% of the comments including a quote from another contributor or a reference to another username. Trice concluded that the newspaper web comments in his study did not reach the level of deliberation, but they were “clearly active and interactive” (p. 246). Singer (2009) conducted a qualitative study of 39,300 comments on 428 stories posted by *The Scotsman* on Scotsman.com. She found a “robust and geographically wide-ranging” (p. 490) discussion that presented some elements of a public sphere, but was hampered by “intense interaction among a vocal few, with minimal participation by most of those who ventured into the discourse” (p. 490). Winsvold (2013) compared comments on local politics on forums hosted by two Norwegian newspapers, classifying them according to what she termed the deliberative, competitive and participatory democratic ideals. Discussion fitting

the participatory ideal occurred most often (in 58% of the postings); discussion fitting the competitive ideal was the next most common (22%); and the deliberative ideal was displayed in only 10% of the postings. De La Poype and Sood (2012) and Zhou et al. (2008) found deliberation present, but at minimal levels, in French and Chinese media websites, respectively, and Chae (2005) found in an analysis of 25 local newspapers' online forums that they provide "a meaningful social space for ordinary people to acknowledge each other with different views and approach" (Findings and Discussion, closed structure, ¶ 2).

A large portion of the studies conducted thus far of online political research have involved websites that lean toward a specific ideology: conservative or liberal blogs (e.g. Hargittai et al., 2008); Usenet sites devoted to specific political viewpoints (e.g. talk.libertarian in Wilhelm, 1999); and Facebook pages established to discuss one side of a specific issue (e.g. Stuttgart 21 in Gerwin, 2011). Few studies thus far have explored political discussion in online spaces striving to be neutral ground for public discussion on any particular political or civic topic, as newspaper web forums attempt to do. While it is true that newspapers can, and do at times, display leanings toward liberal or conservative politics and that the media environment appears to be growing more openly polarized, (Pew Research Center Journalism Project, 2008), the press, as an institution, still clings to its foundational mission as the fourth estate of democracy. Between 1997 and 1999, the Journalism Project worked with journalists around the nation to define the work of journalism. They came up with nine core principles, the first of which is: "Journalism's first obligation is to the

truth,” and the second of which is “Its first loyalty is to citizens” (Pew Research Center Journalism Project, n.d.). While many have argued about how well this mission is played out in practice in the U.S. (Stepp, 2002), the majority of readers of local newspapers today likely grew up indoctrinated with this image of the press. Especially since the most avid local news consumers have been documented as 40 years old or older (Pew Research Center Journalism Project, 2012). While mass media outlets may all have some form of bias in practice, the media’s overall commitment to objective and accurate reporting of facts likely attracts readers and contributors who are looking for a higher standard of cross-cutting debate than those attracted to websites specifically designed to be politically biased. According to a report by the Pew Research Center Journalism Project (2013a), the ideological demographics of U.S. adults who said they consumed news through Facebook is 26% Republican, 38% Democrat and 30% independent. So local newspaper online forums, including those operated through the Facebook application, could hold a strong potential to provide a glimpse into political discussion among private citizens of varying political beliefs and varying demographics, thus providing one of the most likely online spaces for deliberative democracy to thrive and influence citizens.

As practically all of the past research on newspaper web forums has been conducted on the national level or on national issues in metropolitan media, it is important to look at what these forums are like on the local level. First, local newspapers have served an important function in community building. “The role of newspapers and other media in forming community and national identity has



long been recognized,” noted Singer (2009, p. 482). Anderson (1991) has noted that newspapers are inherently known for their provinciality and are understood to focus “even ‘world events’ into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers” (p. 63). In her survey of newspaper editors, Wahl-Jorgenson (2002) quoted one editor as saying that “our mission is to make living in [local community] more understandable and manageable for the people who live here and the people who read our newspaper” (p. 127). In choosing to focus on local politics in her analysis of newspaper online web forums, Winsvold (2013) notes that “such discussions were assumed to be likely to attract at least some serious and dedicated participants, as the topics discussed would often directly affect the discussants’ lives” (p. 9). With stronger ties to one another—shared life experiences and geographic commonalities—the contributors on a local newspaper website may express a different character of discussion than those participating on a national newspaper website or an ideologically-based site with no geographic tie. According to the Pew 2012 survey, “Local news consumers are more connected to their communities than others... and more likely to think they can improve their communities” (¶ 7). Given their heightened civic interest, local news consumers may have more motivation and interest in civil deliberation among their fellow citizens.

It should be noted that the contributors in newspaper online public forums may or may not represent the same demographics as those local news consumers who rely heavily on print newspapers. A 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center Journalism Project found that while Americans rely on newspapers as their top

source for news on community events, taxes, local government, social services, development and more, that the websites of newspapers and TV stations did not score as highly as a relied-upon information source on any topic. The survey indicated that such websites had “gained modest footholds” as sources for weather, crime, politics and breaking news, but had overall consistently low scores. However, while the number of contributors on newspaper online web forums were very small when compared to total subscribers or readers of the print version, there can be no doubt that the future holds increasing and enhanced digital distribution of news if newspapers hope to survive. For good or ill, “...journalism has leaped into the arms of the web for its economic survival” (Trice, 2011, p. 236). Newspaper website comments “shape the news experience in which they exist,... Thus, they warrant documentation as a reality of modern journalism, and must be considered as part of the journalistic system” (p. 246), Trice concluded.

As the scholarly record on newspaper web forums has shown their consistent ability to host at least some levels of deliberative discussion, the technological design of newspaper web forums is intended to facilitate discussion of public issues, and the characteristics of the local news audience show potential for cross-cutting debate of civic issues, it was found that *The Commercial Appeal* and *The Tennessean* web forums do have the potential to act as a public sphere and to host deliberative discussion. In addition, past research cited in the literature review noted that Facebook pages also held the potential to enhance political discussion by providing a largely civil discussion space. Finally, past studies of

newspaper web forums have also shown that newspaper web forums' include liberal individualist or participatory communication, showing their ability to host other types of communication besides deliberative. Preliminary review of pilot data collected from *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* reinforced these conclusions. Therefore, affirmative conclusions for each of the research questions were used as the basis for the three hypotheses discussed below.

### *Hypotheses*

The two newspapers selected for this study differ in two important ways that may influence the character of the democratic communication carried out within them: anonymity and technological affordances typical of SNS. As of the date of this analysis, *The Commercial Appeal* allowed anonymous comments, posting only contributors' profile names. *The Tennessean*, however, used the Facebook comments application, which required contributors to have a Facebook profile in order to comment and posted the name and photo associated with that Facebook profile. According to the Facebook community standards (Facebook, n.d.), "On Facebook people connect using their real names and identities... Claiming to be another person, creating a false presence for an organization, or creating multiple accounts undermines community and violates Facebook's terms" (Facebook, n.d., Community standards). While it is true that Facebook's rule to use real names has not been strictly enforced by the company (Malone, 2013), the social pressure of those who use it, have made using a real name and photo the standard norm for the majority of contributors. Distinguin, Platini and Buchet (as cited in Skågeby, 2009) note that "the culture in Facebook is seen as



supportive of ‘real identities’” (p. 70). The norm of using a real name, or at least one perceived as real, did appear to migrate to *The Tennessean* comment section as all but one of the 83 user profiles documented for this study appeared to be using real names and photos. There was no way to confirm that the profile names were in fact the real names, and there were some profile names that appeared to be pseudonyms, so the Facebook-style comment section of *The Tennessean* was considered a partially anonymous environment, as defined by Anonymous (1998), where a source can be individually specified but there is not much information about the source.

As has previously been noted, studies into anonymity in online discussion and group decision-making have shown that anonymity can encourage more participation but also causes less group identification (Scott, 1999) and possibly higher levels of negative comments by encouraging individualistic, anti-normative behavior (Scott, 2004). Studies of SNS, specifically Facebook discourse, where contributors generally provided their real names, have found higher levels of civility (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009), a characteristic found to facilitate deliberative discussion (Hurrell, 2005). In his three models of online democratic communication, Freelon (2010) describes his liberal individualist model as encompassing “all characteristics of online conversation involving personal expression and the pursuit of self-interest” (p. 1178). According to the SIDE theory (Scott, 1999), the stronger a discourse participant’s personal identity is and the lower the social identity of the group is, the less likely the participant is to adhere to group norms of discussion. Therefore, in a fully anonymous web

forum made up of contributors with weak ties from throughout a large city, one would expect to see less adherence to group norms of civility and more personal expression and pursuit of self-interest. Therefore, the proposed first hypothesis for this study was:

H1 – Political discussion on the web forum of *The Commercial Appeal* will display more characteristics of the liberal individualist online democratic communication model than *The Tennessean* web forum does.

Besides source identification, the Facebook comments application provided to *The Tennessean* another technological affordance typical of SNS: affordances designed to enhance an atmosphere of community. Facebook profiles allowed contributors to post personal photos, hobbies, occupations, birthdays, political affiliation, and other personal information for others in their network to see. *The Tennessean*'s Facebook comments application displayed comments on stories in the same format used on Facebook's scrolling "wall" of comments by "friends," with the profile name, occupation and photo displayed to all users. The application also empowered contributors to "reply" to, "like," or earn a "top commenter" badge (based on number of likes received), further building personal links among those commenting on the web forum. Skågeby (2009) concluded that social metadata, defined as interpersonal data used in SNS such as tags, comments, ties, and group affiliations, add "qualitative bonding value to profiles and media objects" (p. 69). "Empowering end users with a variety of ways to communicate regard [such as "top commenter" status] can, quite literally, add value to online gifting" (p. 71). Greenhow (2010) described the community-

building effects of various SNS technological affordances in her report on Hot Dish, a “niche network within Facebook” (p. 56) created by Greenhow and others specifically to engage young people in discussion of environmental issues. The site featured personal profiles, the abilities to share content or invite others to read it and the ability to vote on the best content, among other standard SNS features. It also offered accumulated points, rankings and titles for contributors’ off-line environmental activism. Users of Hot Dish reported that the “social networking environment was more conducive to self-expression and critical conversation than traditional websites” (p. 60); public recognition on the site spurred continual participation; and profiles and user contributions “facilitated members getting to know other members more deeply” (p. 61).

In his three models of online democratic communication, Freelon (2010) described the communitarian category as an online space that displays “high levels of ingroup interaction and collective identity construction and... a commitment to strong ingroup/outgroup boundaries” (p. 1177). Among the stated characteristics of this model were ideological homophily, interactive comments and questioning within the group, and displays of community identification. Given that the Facebook application for newspaper web forums includes two technological affordances designed to build community identification and interaction—source identification and social metadata—one would expect the comments within the Facebook-style web forum to display more of Freelon’s characteristics of a communitarian space than forums without such technological affordances. Therefore the proposed second hypothesis for this study was:



H2-Political discussion on the web forum of *The Tennessean* will display more characteristics of the communitarian online democratic communication model than the web forum of *The Commercial Appeal* does.

Many newspapers that use the Facebook comments application have reported an increase in the number of comments and hits on their news websites (Malone, 2013). The partnerships between newspaper forums and Facebook are part of the growing use of Facebook for online political discussion, which was not one of its primary functions when it was created. According to a Pew Research Center Journalism Project (2013b) study, “news is a common but incidental part of the [Facebook] experience” (Introduction). Among the findings were (a) 30% of adults got news on Facebook (b) 64% clicked on Facebook links to news stories (c) 32% discussed news issues with people on Facebook (d) 60% “liked” or commented on news stories; and (e) 43% posted or shared links to news stories. Few people went to their Facebook network specifically to find news or political discussion. Only 16% of Facebook users said they went to Facebook to get news, and 35% said they were bothered when friends post political statements (Pew Research Center Journalism Project, 2013c). However, Facebook pages devoted to political issues are proliferating. Williams and Gulati (2007) stated that there were several thousand Facebook groups with a political focus as of 2006. Of course many of these groups are related to election campaigns. Facebook provided candidates space on the network in both 2006 and 2008 (Williams & Gulati, 2013). Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard reported in 2010 that 40% of

SNS users say they have used MySpace and Facebook for political information with 22% using the sites to discover the political interest of friends and 22% seeking campaign information.

To date, there is not a large body of research on political discourse on SNS. Prior to the rise of SNS, most online communities were based on topical discussion (e.g. Usenet) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), but SNS “are structured as personal (or ‘egocentric’) networks, with the individual at the center of their own community” (p. 219). Such a change in focus could change the character of political discussion from that studied in the past. In fact, previous research has noted that Facebook discussions produced more civil comments (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009), more polite comments and longer messages than anonymous web forums and some rational arguments on highly sensitive topics (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). In addition, a Facebook-style web forum hosted by a local newspaper would appear to meet many of the conditions Dahlberg (2001b) laid out as needed to encourage people to take advantage of the reasoned, civil discourse within a traditional public space: a safe environment promoting respectful and sincere discussions, a link to everyday life and user-friendly technology. As has been previously noted, a civil environment tends to facilitate a deliberative discussion (Papacharissi, 2004). As newspapers turn to social media as a potential way to host viable, deliberative web forums—a goal they see as part of their mission to nurture an informed public—it is important to know if increased civility on SNS-style web forums can feasibly produce enhanced deliberation, characterized by (Freelon, 2010) rational-critical arguments, discussion that cuts

across ideological divides, equality of participation, focus on public issue topics and interactive discussion and questioning among the group. Therefore, the proposed third hypothesis for the paper was:

H3- Political discussion on the web forum of *The Tennessean* will display more characteristics of the deliberative online democratic communication model than *The Commercial Appeal* web forum does.



## CHAPTER IV

### Methodology

#### *Samples and Procedures*

This analysis used the coding and counting approach to computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) laid out by Herring (2004), to compare the deliberative, communitarian and liberal individualist characteristics of online political discourse on two web forums hosted by local newspapers in Tennessee. *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* were selected for several reasons. First, they represented the two Tennessee newspapers with the largest circulations: 84,871 print subscribers and 1.9 million monthly unique visitors to the website for *The Tennessean* and 78,030 print subscribers and 1.5 million unique monthly visitors to the website for *The Commercial Appeal* (Tennessee Press Association, 2014). They serve the two largest cities in Tennessee. Second, these newspapers' forums were representative of the type to be studied: an anonymous forum at *The Commercial Appeal* and a pseudo-anonymous social network at *The Tennessean*. Third, Memphis and Nashville are both urban areas with similar political ideology, as they were the only two congressional districts in Tennessee to lean towards the Democratic party, according to the 2014 Cook's Partisan Voting Index (Cook Political Report, n.d.). Finally, they both were among the top newspaper web forums in Tennessee with the most online activity by contributors over the course of a week.

Except for the technological affordance differences considered in this study—source identification and social metadata—the two forums had similar

policies and formats for contributors. Both located their forums at the bottom of each story posted on the newspapers' websites. At the time a subscriber submitted a comment, *The Commercial Appeal* notified contributors that their comments will be reviewed by a moderator before they are made live on the site. On *The Tennessean* site, comments were posted immediately, but the web forum's "FAQ" page informed users that "our site moderators review comments periodically and have the option to ban users if necessary" (Tennessean, n.d.). Both offered an option to report abuse. Both included text at the top of their forum pages calling for civil discussion. Both had single-click options allowing contributors to reply specifically to a previously posted comment.

There were a few differences. *The Commercial Appeal* allowed only subscribers to comment on their forums, while *The Tennessean* allowed anyone with a Facebook profile, subscriber or not, to comment. However, both provided only limited access to their content for non-subscribers. *The Commercial Appeal* required contributors to register, which required setting up a profile name, but it did not require the profile name to be the user's real name. In practice, the vast majority of contributors did not use a real name on *The Commercial Appeal* forum. Another difference between the two was in the handling of abusive remarks, or flaming. *The Commercial Appeal* site left a placeholder remark, communicating to users that a comment had been removed. *The Tennessean* left no placeholder remark, eliminating the possibility for this study to use such placeholders as evidence of flaming. This study assumed that any remark civil

enough for the moderators to leave on the forum did not rise to the level of “flaming” but was coded as an insult.

The data for this thesis was collected from both newspapers’ web forums over a two-week period in September 2013. This time period was selected because it coincided with a session of the U.S. Congress when several matters of civic importance were to be discussed, including a potential bombing of Syria and the end of the government’s fiscal year. The data consisted of individual comments posted in “threads” connected to newspaper articles regarding politics or civic issues. All collected comments were made within 24 hours of the article’s posting. During the two-week period, 379 articles were posted on both the newspapers’ websites and corresponding Facebook pages. Of those, 70 articles met the criteria for political and civic-related stories. The criteria used to select the articles were first, that the article had been posted on both the newspaper’s website and the newspaper’s Facebook site in order to obtain articles likely to have high levels of activity, and second, that it pertained to a political or civic topic. Parameters used to identify topics of a political or civic nature were (a) any article that involved a government agency or policy, (b) any article involving an elected official or politician, (c) education articles that involved governmental regulation or the political aspects of providing education, (d) conflict between nations, (e) stories on court cases exploring the political aspects of the case, and (f) broad-based societal issues that involve governmental factors, such as the economy, job growth or homelessness. Articles on crime, higher education, traffic and road construction, tourism and airport operation were all excluded because



these topics often did not address specific political issues or involved such a mesh of private and public interests that their categorization became difficult.

Local, state and national stories were all considered. Forty-seven threads with a total of 1,063 comments were collected from *The Commercial Appeal* and 528 comments from 23 threads were collected from *The Tennessean*. Threads with less than 15 comments on the web forum or less than 5 comments on the Facebook posting were eliminated, in an effort to select the stories with the most public interest and interactivity. This left seven usable threads in *The Commercial Appeal*, providing 371 comments, and eight usable threads in *The Tennessean*, providing 371 comments. One comment thread in *The Tennessean* was eliminated because none of the comments were found to discuss the political aspects of the article.

Herring (2004) recommended using a motivated sample in CMDA, and noted that sampling by time “preserves the richest context” (p. 351). As interactivity was of importance in this study, all the comments in threads with 15 to 25 comments were used. In threads with more than 25 comments, 25 consecutive comments, starting at a randomly selected comment, were used, in effect sampling by time. The final data sample contained 162 comments from *The Tennessean* and 163 comments from *The Commercial Appeal*. Off-topic comments, comments directed to newspaper staff, advertisements, undecipherable comments and flaming notifications were eliminated, leaving 149-comments from *The Tennessean* and 141 comments from *The Commercial Appeal*.

## *Measures*

In 2010, Freelon took up the task to develop a conceptual scheme appropriate to compare “divergent forms of political discourse” (p. 1176). He studied past research of online political discussion and developed metrics based on those used in past studies in “mass communication, information science, political science, critical-feminist studies, education and developmental psychology, among others” (p. 1178). His study resulted in three proposed models of online democratic communication and 15 metrics (see Appendix for definitions). Freelon’s (2010) quantifiers have been applied directly to online discourse at least twice. In his 2012 dissertation, Freelon used them to analyze a national newspaper web forum and compare it to a Twitter hashtag forum and a website designed specifically for deliberative discussion. He found that the newspaper web forum did display more liberal individualist characteristics than the other two web platforms. Gerwin (2011) applied Freelon’s quantifiers to two Facebook pages designed for those of a specific political leaning to discuss a specific civic issue. He classified the pages as communitarian. This analysis builds on these two studies by applying Freelon’s metrics to a local newspaper web forum, which may produce a more deliberative or communitarian discussion as the readers share common geography and governance. It also builds on Gerwin’s study, by applying the quantifiers to a forum involving contributors with more diverse ideologies, which may result in a more deliberative discourse.

Five of Freelon’s original metrics were found to be not relevant or too unwieldy to use within the context of this study. Initial observation of the

newspaper web forums and pilot coding found no presence of personal showcase, mobilization or collective pronouns indicating community identity, so they were left out of the analysis (see Appendix for definition of these metrics). Due to the broad spectrum of issues newspapers cover and the relative freedom forum contributors had to discuss any aspect of the topic at hand or to even wander off-topic, public issue focus and discussion topic focus became very difficult to code with accuracy. Therefore, only articles that clearly fell within a public issue focus and comments that fell within the discussion topic focus of that article were included.

Obviously newspapers' public forums are hardly limited to public issue discussion, but the question of whether newspapers' websites as a whole can be defined as a public sphere was beyond the scope of this analysis. This analysis explored whether the political discourse that does exist on newspaper websites, no matter how much of the whole it represents, displays characteristics of deliberative, communitarian or liberal individualist democratic communication. Within each thread, if a comment or string of comments were deemed off-topic, those comments were eliminated. Following the lead of Stromer-Galley and Martinson (2005), the discussion topic focus was given fairly broad parameters, often including comments on issues that were natural outgrowths of the original topic (e.g. a discussion of school vouchers in an article about controversy surrounding the state education commissioner) and even insults in some cases. The topics of the coded threads in *The Tennessean* were (a) a senator's stance on the potential bombing of Syria, (b) a proposed plan to close city schools due to



budget woes, (c) a state official's public comments on President Obama's handling of the Syria crisis, (d) the governor's comments defending the state education commissioner, (e) a state legislative hearing on new education curriculum standards, (f) announcement of a public art project, (g) a report accusing governing entities of promoting fear of Islam and (h) a report on the educators' union voting no confidence in the state education commissioner. The topics of the coded threads in *The Commercial Appeal* were (a) a senator's comments on President Obama's handling of the Syria crisis, (b) a report on the inability of the city of Memphis to pay out its pension plan for employees, (c) a column on the importance of keeping the food stamp program funded, (d) a redevelopment plan for an old fairgrounds site in the city core, (e) a proposal to begin the school year after Labor Day in the city of Bartlett, (f) Tennessee's policy to not issue driver's licenses to same-sex married couples under the spouse's new married name and (g) a proposal to issue beer permits for special events in Bartlett.

The quantifiers chosen for use in this analysis were: monologue; personal revelation; insults; rational-critical argument; diversity of opinion (called ideological homophily in Freelon's 2010 study); intra- and inter-ideological questioning, justifications and acknowledgements; and equality. Each quantifier is discussed in detail below, but to see a summary of definitions of these quantifiers and examples of each from the data refer to Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1

Samples of coded comments for all 10 quantifiers

| Comment-level Quantifiers       | Definition  | Examples from The Commercial Appeal <sup>a</sup>   | Examples from The Tennessean <sup>b</sup>   |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Rational-critical argument      | A nondirected comment that presented a reason for the contributor's opinion.                          | [Sandino] Another constitutionalist.....you should be for this then. Its their constitutional right to have the same benefits everyone else has.   | [10] What! We are about to attack a sovereign nation that poses no national threat to our country, come on Jim, man up!   |
| Inter-ideological justification | A rational-critical argument directed to another contributor who disagreed with the sender's opinion. | <p>[TruckStop] Diplomacy with the Russians is a shell game. Good news from Annapolis. "Our professional military" is still churning out leaders trained to protect the foot soldiers of our American republic.</p> <p>[jrgolden] And by the way it is a professional military. Unlike the Russians, Egyptians, Chinese, and Syrians our force isn't loaded with conscripts. The All Volunteer force is indeed a professional military.</p> | <p>[1] Another pathway for Nashville to go broke ?</p> <p>[2] After just completing a \$600 million Music City Center, I don't think \$750k for a sculpture is going to tip us over the edge.</p> |

| Comment-level Quantifiers          | Definition   | Examples from The Commercial Appeal <sup>a</sup>   | Examples from The Tennessean <sup>b</sup>  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Inter-ideological questions        | An honest question directed to a disagreeing contributor, either seeking information or meant to promote debate. | <p>[StayThirstyMyFriends] Yes, the city got out from under new annual payments to MCS because MCS no longer exists, It does not, however, negate the existing debt, now legally owed by the city to SCS. The merger changed nothing relative to the outstanding debt, only who it is owed to.</p> <p>[inthegrove72#700117] I see. Would it be possible that the \$\$ to fund this project will be in the form of grants and maybe some TARP dollars that can't be used for munipicle debt?</p>   | <p>[17] ...The local leadership has obviously failed. They paid The Tribal Group to come in and study what needed to be done to improve the schools. When the report came back they fired the group for telling the truth and buried the study.</p> <p>[19] Jerry Taylor Why do you put so much faith in the Tribal Group? Do you have reason to know their report was correct or do you simply like it because it says what you wanted to hear?</p> |
| Inter-ideological acknowledge-ment | One contributor endorsing all or part of the argument of a disagreeing contributor.                              | <p>[tigersfan] There is already "a multipurpose building for seating of about 5,000 spectators that can be reconfigured for sporting and civic events." Its called THE MIDSOUTH COLLISEUM ! The Beatles, Elvis, James Brown, Jerry Lawler, Keith Lee, Larry Finch etc etc all played there... it should be updated and used</p> <p>[MidtownMafia] Couldn't agree more with this sentiment. However, reality is that the cost to update and bring coliseum up to codes and modern standards is far greater than tearing down and starting from scratch...</p> | <p>[9] It's time for Huffman and Haslam to GO! We can no longer play roulette with our kids education.</p> <p>[11] I agree, stop playing roulette with our children. Give a kid a voucher and you give a kid a fighting chance.</p>  |



| <b>Comment-level Quantifiers</b> | <b>Definition</b>   | <b>Examples from The Commercial Appeal<sup>a</sup></b>   | <b>Examples from The Tennessean<sup>b</sup></b>  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Monologue                        | A nondirected comment included opinion only and no reason for that opinion.   | [happy_leaf] Bob Corker is one of the worst republicans in recent memory. He should cork it! What outrageous comments.   | [17] The United States of America is and always has been a Christian Country!  |
| Personal Revelation              | Comments that included first-person pronouns and information about the commenter himself or herself.                  | [Bartlett_Vol] I'm a combat veteran with kids in school, I don't have any problem with them being in school and receiving special educational programing about the significance of the day. I've been to the Veteran's Day ceremony at Veteran's Park in Bartlett on that day, its not exactly overrun with students on their day off... | [5] Last week he was weighing his options; I called his office and reported that between me and 15 FaceBook friends we had over 20,000 Tennesseans as friends...seems sorta late to come to the decision as most of us knew from the get go...   |
| Insult                           | Any personal attack on a user as opposed to an attack on their opinions or arguments, with or without harsh language. | [Centurian] As for you answer above to my comment, didn't your mama ever tell you it's ignorant to publicly expose that you're a brainwashed rightwing nitwit without a heart?   | [70] And the real wizard of STUPID steps in and hurls a blast of complete ignorance across the WWW. Put Ramsey and This Campfart in the same room and you'll have the world record for "Most Stupid Inside of Four Walls".. I would fight with Al Qaeda if they were fighting these bafoons. |

| Comment-level Quantifiers       | Definition   | Examples from The Commercial Appeal <sup>a</sup>   | Examples from The Tennessean <sup>b</sup>  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Intra-ideological justification | A rational-critical argument directed to another contributor who agrees with the sender's opinion. | [datGuy] Freeze the pension. Replace with a 401k (403b). Stop suggesting we should be giving MORE pensions to people. [imjim#712762] DatGuy's answer is the solution business has used - in overwhelming numbers. Our municipal governments need to do the same, asap. | [16] ...I continue to wait for Huffman's response a year later. There is *no* research b/c it wasn't done. I'm ALL in this fight & AS A MOM, have a large claim in the stakes! Stop messing with our kids!<br><br>[17] You are correct. There is no independent research on Common Core- not even a pilot study...."For starters, the misnamed "Common Core State Standards" are not state standards. They're national standards, created by Gates-funded consultants for the National Governors Association (NGA). [hyperlink to additional information included] |
| Intra-ideological questions     | An honest question addressed to a contributor in agreement with the sender.                        | None coded.  | None coded.  |

| Comment-level Quantifiers        | Definition  | Examples from The Commercial Appeal <sup>a</sup>   | Examples from The Tennessean <sup>b</sup>  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Intra-ideological acknowledgment | One contributor endorsing all or part of the argument of an agreeing contributor. | <p>[jots] “When you talk about a family event, you don’t need beer in my opinion,” Young said. You obviously have never met my extended family. :0)</p> <p>[DocRambo] Second that motion and I'll drink to that!</p> | <p>[18} I keep trying to find out just exactly why these "reformers" think they are the gurus of public education!</p> <p>[19] Sally Andrew, you and I both know that "corporate guru" doesn't equate to "education guru." Unless the connection is "Hubris." Pretty much all they know about education is that they went to school.</p> |



*Thread-level quantifiers.*

Two of the quantifiers pertain to more than one of the communication models and were coded at the thread level: equality and opinion diversity. Researchers have observed in many forums a “small core of very active users” (Albrecht, 2006, p. 68) who distort the many-to-many model of online communication until it becomes equivalent to “traditional political communication: a few selected individuals make their views heard to a broad audience of passive listeners” (p. 68). Equality was measured in this study by noting the unique screen name of each contributor and the number of comments each posted within the collected data. A more equal distribution of participants indicated that at least one characteristic of deliberative democratic communication was present; less equal participation denoted a characteristic of liberal individualist communication.

Opinion diversity is a metric designed to measure ideological homophily within an online forum. Many researchers have documented ideological isolationism on the Internet, which can be an obstacle to deliberative democracy (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargattai et al., 2008; Sunstein, 2007). The less opinion diversity found in a forum, the more communitarian communication was present. Higher levels of opinion diversity indicated deliberative spaces, and the highest levels indicated liberal individualist spaces. Freelon (2012) coded opinion diversity by determining the boundaries of progressive and conservative stances on each of the three issues he was considering. He then determined on which side of that dichotomy each comment fell. The higher the ratio between those

comments in the majority and those in the minority, the more liberal individualist and deliberative the space was considered to be, no matter which ideological side of the issue the majority fell on. However, this approach was found to be unwieldy for this analysis as the newspaper topics covered a wide range of political issues and the contributors often veered off into conversations roaming far a field of the original article topic. Preliminary analysis of these web forums showed that one contributor's comments could potentially fall within the majority in one area of discussion, but fall within the minority in another area of discussion—sometimes within the same thread. It also became apparent that the topic of the framing news article made a significant difference in the level of opinion diversity. Singer (2009) experienced similar problems in her analysis of web comments on two months' worth of stories on the "Holyrood Elections" in Scotland. "The lack of exclusive comment topic categories poses analytical problems, and although it preserves the richness and breadth of the discourse, it does so at the expense of other potential insights" (p. 492) wrote Singer. Therefore, in this analysis, opinion diversity was measured based only on those comments coded as responses, as defined by the indication within the web forum software or in some cases obvious language and word choice. An issue stance—pro, con or unclear—was determined for each comment, but only as a means of determining whether following responses agreed or disagreed with that particular comment. Each response was then judged to be agreeing or disagreeing with the comment it was responding to only. The pro and con responses were then grouped accordingly to determine the number of agreeing and disagreeing comments

throughout the forum. The larger the ratio between the pro and con responses, the more liberal individualist or deliberative the space was considered to be.

### *Deliberative model*

Freelon developed his quantifiers for deliberation from “longstanding concepts” (Freelon, 2012, p. 35) in political discourse research. The four additional quantifiers used in this analysis to identify the deliberative form of democratic communication were rational-critical argument, and three compound quantifiers designed to measure both content and reciprocity of the contributors: inter-ideological justification, questioning and acknowledgment. While Freelon listed only inter-ideological questioning and response in his models in his 2010 work, he later refined the reciprocal metrics into justification, questioning and acknowledgement in his 2012 dissertation.

The element of deliberation most-widely agreed upon by political theorists to show rational-critical thinking is opinion justification (Freelon, 2012). “Simply stating political preferences is not a deliberative act—reasons must be presented in their defense” (p. 18). Stromer-Galley (2007) coded justification, or elaboration, as definitions, reasons for holding an opinion, examples, information from external sources, statistics, hypothetical examples, analogies and more (see p. 10). Here rational-critical argument was defined as a nondirected comment that presented a reason for the contributor’s opinion. Following Freelon’s (2012) and Stromer-Galley’s (2007) lead, any stated reason for a particular opinion, even if seemingly invalid, was counted as a rational-critical argument, as it is not possible to verify the validity of all reasons in the discussion.



Freelon (2012) argued that it is not enough to measure online deliberation by only analyzing what the contributors say. Researchers should also analyze who the comment is made to because the deliberative power of the comment can change depending on the intended recipient of the message. Stromer-Galley (2007) contended that discourse analysis researchers must note whether “participants are actually engaging with each other, or if they are simply engaging in monologues in the presence of an audience” (p. 7). In his 2010 model, Freelon included inter- and intra-ideological quantifiers differentiated as reasoned comments and questions addressed to those with opposing views (inter) and those with reinforcing views (intra). The more conversation and argument there was between contributors who agreed with one another, the more communitarian he considered the space. The more conversation and argument among people who disagreed with each other, the more deliberative he considered the space. “It is not sufficient that all citizens be considered as potential participants in political deliberations, they must also actually communicate across lines of difference to fully realize the ideal” (Freelon, 2010, p. 1182).

In this analysis, inter-ideological justification was operationalized as a rational-critical argument directed to another contributor who disagreed with the sender’s opinion. As both *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* had technological features allowing contributors to reply to a specific user, it was simple to identify most direct responses through the use of this technological feature, the contributors’ use of screen names and the contributors’ use of direct quotes from other comments. An honest question directed to a disagreeing

contributor, either seeking information or sometimes obviously meant to promote debate on a topic, was coded as inter-ideological questioning. "Genuine questions attempt to illicit information from others, and hence as a process invite engagement with others" (Stromer-Galley, 2007, p. 12). Rhetorical questions were determined based on the context and the judgment of the coder and were not included as a deliberative question. Inter-ideological acknowledgement was defined as one contributor endorsing all or part of the argument of a disagreeing contributor. Freelon (2012) noted that deliberation requires participants to remain "open to each other's arguments and opinions. That is, they must not only attend to what their fellow discussants say, they must also remain open in principle to persuasion" (p. 18). Inter-ideological acknowledgement was used by Freelon to measure this openness.

### *Liberal individualist*

The three quantifiers used in this analysis for identifying liberal individualist communication were monologue, personal revelation and insults. Shank and Cunningham (1996) defined a monologue as "when there is a single sender and one or more passive receivers" (p. 29), and Wilhelm (1999) established his monologue code for Usenet messages as a comment making "no reference to another posting and does not make queries seeking information" (p. 165). Freelon (2012) cited an oft-seen monologue as "opinions unaccompanied by reasons" (p. 97). Here monologues were coded as comments that did not include the screen name of another contributor, were not direct replies to another contributor, included opinion only, and did not include a statement of reasons for

that opinion. Fraser argued that eliminating personal reflection from deliberation “serves to perpetuate existing power dynamics” (as cited in Freelon, 2010, p. 1179). Drawing on this argument, Fraser included a personal revelation metric in her model. Personal revelation was defined here as comments that included first-person pronouns and information about the commenter himself or herself.

Hill and Hughes (1998) defined flaming as attacks on someone as a person, as opposed to attacks of their ideas or arguments. Freelon (2010) proposed that flaming should be included within the study of online political forums so that the data can be characterized in terms of both “democracy-enhancing and -detracting conversation” (p. 1179). The traditional definition of deliberation specifically excludes harsh language and negative attacks (Freelon, 2012), therefore flaming can be used as a measurement of the lack of deliberation. Conversely, “liberal individualists are more interested in harshly criticizing those they disagree with” (Freelon, 2012, p. 97), so the existence of flaming can be used as a measurement for the liberal individualist model. The two newspapers in this study both used moderators to remove flaming from the forums, but the comments still included plenty of personal attacks on other contributors. This analysis incorporated the metric of flaming by measuring insults—any personal attack on the user as opposed to an attack on their opinions or arguments. Common language used in insults were “racist,” “idiot,” “weak liberals” and “teabaggers.” Comments launching personal attacks, but lacking negative language, were also coded as insults. The more insults found in the forum, the



more liberal individualist the discussion was considered to be; the fewer insults found, the more deliberative the discussion.

### Communitarian model

The three quantifiers used to identify the communitarian type of communication are: intra-ideological justification, questioning and acknowledgment. A rational-critical argument directed to another contributor who agrees with the sender's opinion was coded as intra-ideological justification. Intra-ideological questioning was operationalized as an honest question addressed to a contributor in agreement with the sender. Intra-ideological acknowledgement was measured as one contributor endorsing all or part of the argument of an agreeing contributor.

For the purposes of this study, it was considered that one comment could include multiple types of quantifiers, falling in line with researchers who have noted that web forums include aspects of deliberation while also including various aspects of other types of communication (Freelon, 2012).

## CHAPTER V

### Results

The results of this discourse analysis showed no significant difference between any of the quantifiers in *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* web forums. In fact, Table 2 on the following page shows that the number of comments in each category in each forum were strikingly similar. Both forums displayed an almost equal amount of deliberative (just under 50% each), liberal individualist (just over 40% each) and communitarian (13.29% in *The Commercial Appeal* vs. 11.33 % in *The Tennessean*) democratic communication norms. Therefore, none of the three hypotheses were supported by the data.

Table 2

Percentages of the instances of each quantifier in each forum

| Quantifier/Democratic Communication Model                 | <i>The Tennessean</i><br>(N=150 instances) | The Commercial Appeal<br>(N=143 instances) |
|---|--|--|
| Liberal Individualist                                     |  |  |
| Monologues  | 24.67 (37)                                 | 25.87 (37)                                 |
| Personal revelation                                       | 6.67 (10)                                  | 4.90 (7)                                   |
| Insults   | 10 (15)                                    | 11.89 (17)                                 |
| Total comments with liberal individualist characteristics | 41.33 (62)                                 | 42.66 (61)                                 |
|   |  |  |
| Deliberative  |  |  |
| Rational-critical argument                                | 17.33 (26)                                 | 20.98 (30)                                 |
| Inter-ideological justification                           | 26 (39)                                    | 18.88 (27)                                 |
| Inter-ideological question                                | 3.33 (5)                                   | 2.10 (3)                                   |
| Inter-ideological acknowledgement                         | 0.67 (1)                                   | 4.20 (6)                                   |
| Total comments with deliberative characteristics          | 47.33 (71)                                 | 46.15 (66)                                 |
|   |  |  |
| Communitarian   |  |  |
| Intra-ideological justification                           | 3.33 (5)                                   | 2.10 (3)                                   |
| Intra-ideological question                                | 0  | 0  |
| Intra-ideological acknowledgement                         | 8 (12)                                     | 11.19 (16)                                 |
| Total comments with communitarian characteristics         | 11.33 (17)                                 | 13.29 (19)                                 |

In terms of equality, both forums appeared to be balanced, but *The Tennessean* proved to be unusually balanced with one-third of the comments coming from the top five most active contributors (posting five or more comments



each) and slightly more than a third coming from one-time contributors and slightly more than a third from the remaining contributors (who posted two to four comments each). Contributors to *The Commercial Appeal* were slightly more active, with one-time posters making up slightly less than a quarter of the comments. Slightly more than one-third came from the top five most active contributors, and 40% came from the remaining contributors (posting two to four comments each). Unlike many studies of the past (Singer, 2009), this analysis found that the top contributors did not dominate the conversation, as the top contributor in the entire study posted only 10 comments out of 149 comments coded for that newspaper. In all, 166 unique screen names were represented in the 290 comments coded. Therefore the forum did provide an atmosphere conducive to equal participation, a hallmark of deliberation.

The forums were found to have a high level of reciprocity, with about half of the comments in both forums (55.7% in *The Tennessean* and 48.94% in *The Commercial Appeal* ) coded as responses to other contributors. As shown in Table 3, a majority of responses in both forums disagreed with the previous contributors while smaller minorities either agreed with the previous contributors or made comments that could not be classified as pro or con. Therefore, both forums were found to have a significant level of opinion diversity, another characteristic of deliberation.

Table 3

Percentages of responses agreeing or disagreeing with contributors

| Opinion Diversity | <i>The Tennessean</i> | <i>The Commercial Appeal</i> |
|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Con Responses     | 63.86%                | 57.97%                       |
| Pro Responses     | 18.07%                | 33.33%                       |
| Unclear Responses | 14.46%                | 4.35%                        |

It should be noted that 29 comments were coded as off-topic and therefore excluded from the results. While not included within the parameters of this analysis, such off-topic comments do play a role in diminishing the quality of deliberation within the forums. For example, similar to what Stromer-Galley and Martinson (2005) found, this analysis noted several cases where an argument strayed off-topic to become a personal attack. Thus several insults were excluded from the data.

## CHAPTER VI

### Discussion

This analysis posed the question of whether technological affordances typical of social network sites could have a significant effect on the democratic communication norms within a local newspaper-hosted online forum. Drawing on Freelon's (2010) three models of online democratic communication, it was proposed that allowing contributors to remain anonymous would encourage liberal individualist communication, that incorporating social metadata typical of SNS would encourage communitarian communication and that a combination of the two affordances would encourage deliberative communication. Based on the results, it can be concluded in this case that neither anonymity nor social metadata had a strong enough impact to increase any of the three types of democratic communication within the online discourse.

Although it was not the primary purpose of this study, it is necessary to make some general observations about the democratic communication style displayed in the two forums in order to make comparisons with past studies of online discourse. Because the differences between the two forums were so slight, they will be considered as a whole. In general, *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* web forums appear to be more deliberative and less liberal-individualistic than other newspaper and Facebook forums recently studied (Freelon, 2012; Gerwin, 2011; Singer, 2009; Trice, 2011; Winsvold, 2013). The findings on these two forums are similar to other findings, however, in the sense that they have a distinct lack of communitarian communication (Freelon, 2012).

On the whole, the discussion was largely civil (lacking in harsh language or ad hominem attacks), albeit not particularly friendly or positive. There was no sense of working toward a consensus on any particular topic.

### *Liberal Individualist*

Hypothesis one indicated that due to its pseudo-anonymous format, the online political discussion in *The Commercial Appeal* web forum would display more liberal individualist characteristics than *The Tennessean*. This hypothesis was not supported, as both forums displayed evidence of monologues, personal revelation and insults in almost equal amounts, indicating that anonymity in *The Commercial Appeal* had no additional impact on the character of the discourse. This finding was the most surprising, given the vocal objections of journalists throughout the U.S. who often blame anonymity for the incivility found on their web forums (Reader, 2012). In addition, traditional deindividuation theories would suggest that an anonymous contributor on a newspaper web forum with thousands of contributors would certainly be immersed enough to produce a loss of self and the tendency to delve into antinormative behavior (Scott, 1999). In fact, Kiesler and Sproull (1992) cited a 1986 experiment where flaming on computer-mediated communication was more pronounced when group members were anonymous. Despite its anonymous environment, however, *The Commercial Appeal* forum displayed only one more insult than *The Tennessean*, and a qualitative review of the insults found little difference in the negativity of the comments, despite the fact that *The Commercial Appeal* data included more controversial topics (e.g. race and poverty, and the rights of same-sex couples).



The lack of obscenity was marked. In fact, as the definition of insults used here included only personal attacks and not necessarily harsh language, the insults generally did not include obscenity at all. Among the strongest words used in attacks were “racist,” “whitey,” “redneck bigots,” “criminal” and “wizard of stupid.”

One aspect that may have come into play in this unusual result is that many of *The Commercial Appeal* contributors appear to have been posting for a long time and have come to know many of the other contributors’ opinions, ideologies and even personal information. One example is a contributor who wrote, “I have read many replys [sic] from you and my opinion of you is your [sic] a racist.” While there were a large group of individual contributors included in the analysis, there were 11 contributors who participated in multiple threads in *The Commercial Appeal*, indicating that there is a core group who could easily get to know each other’s opinions and writing styles quite well. In addition, an unscientific review of three days of data collected from *The Commercial Appeal* in August 2011 displayed at least 11 of the same user names found in the data in September 2013. As the anonymous contributors on *The Commercial Appeal* site have interacted for a long time, they could have developed their own virtual history, and according to Scott (1999), that history could have an effect on the communication dynamic of the group. He wrote, “groups with a history are both more ‘realistic’ decision-makers and have different levels of anonymity than zero-history, randomly-assigned groups” (p. 460). Rains and Scott (2007) proposed that previous interactions with an anonymous source and expected future

interaction with that anonymous source will both reduce the perceived anonymity of the source, meaning the message recipients may consider those sources more credible and trustworthy than they would a fully anonymous source with no history of interaction with them (Rains, 2007).

This study proposed that following the tenets of discourse architecture, the technological affordance of anonymity would have a noticeable effect on the online discourse. Perhaps however, another technological affordance—pre-moderation of the comments—was strong enough to temper the negative effects of anonymity and keep the discussion more civil. *The Commercial Appeal* comments are reviewed by a moderator before being posted, as opposed to *The Tennessean*, which periodically reviews the comments once posted and relies on the peer pressure of identification to keep the discussion civil. It could be that the Memphis contributors have been trained over time in how much negativity they can get past the moderator and posted onto the site. Wright and Street (2007) surmised in their study updating Wilhelm's 1999 analysis of Usenet, that Futurum's use of a moderator kept comments more on topic and more civil. The ultimate goal of liberal individualist contributors is to have their personal expressions seen by others, so if everything they write continues to be removed by the moderator, they have no motivation to continue participating. Perhaps the negativity in *The Commercial Appeal* was kept at equivalent levels as in *The Tennessean* by the now ingrained knowledge that the moderator will delete comments that display a certain negativity level.

Finally, Rains (2007) noted in his studies of computer-supported decision-making that, "If the team members support [anonymity's] use, they will be more likely to appropriate anonymity faithfully" (p. 119), meaning message receiver perceptions of the anonymous message senders would be more positive. Reader (2012) shows that contributors of mass media web forums are strongly in favor of keeping anonymity (by 71%) and cite reasons that go beyond their desire for free expression, such as increasing participation, ability to speak truth to power and concern for privacy. Likewise, Rosenberry (2011) found that 94% of his survey respondents agreed that anonymity allows participants "to express ideas they might be afraid to express otherwise" (p. 13). In fact, some contributors in Reader's 2012 survey suggested that journalists are exaggerating the negative effects of anonymity "to ban something the journalists don't like personally" (p.505). If the contributors of these forums see such value in harboring their anonymity, perhaps, at least in a forum with long-term members who know each other well, an unspoken, tacit agreement to advance civil discussion on the forum has developed.

### *Communitarian*

Hypothesis two predicted that *The Tennessean* web forum would display more communitarian characteristics than *The Commercial Appeal* due to its use of social metadata. This hypothesis was not supported as there was very little difference between the two forums. There were so few instances of communitarian quantifiers that it is not feasible to consider either forum communitarian in nature. *The Commercial Appeal* had slightly more



communitarian instances (2 percentage points) because of one thread with a particularly unifying topic: the potential loss of the pension for city employees due to the city's budget woes. This topic galvanized the contributors in their shared opinion that the city government was not well operated. This thread alone resulted in 14 of the 28 intra-ideological acknowledgements found in the analysis. This instance shows that mainstream newspaper web forums do have the potential to nurture discussion among like-minded individuals, but that ability is contingent largely on the topic of the article being discussed, not the technological affordances of the website.

Given the historical mission of the press to nurture an informed citizenry, those who choose to participate in a newspaper web forum are likely selecting it in order to observe a variety of opinions among the contributors. Mutz and Martin (2001) have noted that people are "exposed to far more dissimilar political views via news media than through interpersonal political discussants" (p.97). As the contributors' expect to be exposed to differing ideologies in the discussion, it makes sense that the discussion would lean toward liberal individualism and deliberation and display few communitarian aspects. It would not seem likely that contributors valuing diverse opinion would naturally develop a shared ideology simply because they read the same newspaper.

Freelon (2010) defines a communitarian online space as one providing the "cultivation of social cohesion and group identity above the fulfillment of individual desires" (p. 1180). The results of this analysis show that it obviously takes more than sharing a full name, photo, occupation and access to a friends list



to reach that standard among people who have only weak ties in the real world. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007) defined weak ties as “loose connections between individuals who may provide useful information or new perspectives for one another but typically not emotional support” (p. 1146). Scholars have noted that online technologies do not produce community, as much as enhance communities already in existence (Putnam, 2000). This can certainly be seen in Facebook, which has built an empire on the concept that bringing real-world communities online enhances real-world communication and interaction. Unlike most traditional Facebook networks, however, those commenting on the newspapers’ web forums do not have real-world “strong ties,” defined as “tightly-knit, emotionally close relationships, such as family and close friends” (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1146). Weak ties do not appear strong enough to unify these contributors online into a community that actually displays a group identity and as such tends to dismiss outsiders who disagree with the group ideology, as described by Freelon (2012).

### *Deliberative*

The third hypothesis predicted that online political discussion on *The Tennessean* web forum would be more deliberative than *The Commercial Appeal* due to the use of social metadata and source identification promoting a civil environment within the forum. This hypothesis was not supported as both forums showed an equivalent number of deliberative characteristics. While the deliberative quantifier inter-ideological justification had the largest difference (slightly more than 7 percentage points), that is hardly enough to definitively

declare *The Tennessean* as more deliberative than *The Commercial Appeal*. *The Commercial Appeal* had more nondirected rational-critical arguments and more inter-ideological acknowledgements, while *The Tennessean* had more inter-ideological justifications. In addition, as previously noted, the two forums had almost the same number of insults, indicating an equivalent civil environment. Only one notice of *The Commercial Appeal*'s moderator removing a comment was included within the collected data. So the technological affordances had little to no effect on the level of civility or therefore levels of deliberation.

Considering possible reasons why there was so little difference in deliberative characteristics between the two forums, requires that we first look at how deliberative the two local newspaper forums are. Of the studies reviewed for this literature review, none established a firm threshold for a deliberative online space. In addition, the purpose of this analysis was not to declare the forums deliberative or not per se, so only brief general comparisons intended to bring perspective to the ultimate conclusions will follow. With just under 50% of the instances in each forum displaying deliberative characteristics, *The Tennessean* and *The Commercial Appeal* appear to be more deliberative than some forums previously studied. Gerwin (2011), a qualitative study, found that "discussions that featured opposing arguments were rare" (p. 39) on the Facebook pages he analyzed, and Halpern & Gibbs (2013) found 64.9% of posts on the White House Facebook site presented unjustified claims, compared to 25% or less in this study. In several of the media-hosted or Facebook forums included in this review, the deliberation found was hampered by either a lack of equality, a lack of opinion

diversity or a lack of reciprocity. Singer's (2009) results lacked equality as 123 contributors out of 1,211 unique screen names posted 55% of the comments, producing "intense interaction only among a vocal few" (p. 490). Kushin and Kitchener (2009) found a lack of opinion diversity in their Facebook pages with 73% like-minded comments vs. 17 % opposed. *The Tennessean's* diversity was much higher with 18% like-minded and 63.86% opposed, and *The Commercial Appeal* had similar results. Finally, Trice (2011) found a lack of reciprocity as only 9.7% of newspaper web forum comments were interactive. Wilhelm (1999) found only 20% of messages were addressed to other contributors. The current study found about half of the comments to be interactive. These comparisons lead to a conclusion that these two local newspaper web forums could be categorized as spaces hosting deliberative online communication. However, that deliberation does come with a healthy dose of liberal individualist communication as well (about 40%), a phenomenon that Freelon specifically addressed in his 2012 dissertation, and will be discussed here later.

The reasons why the anonymous discussion on *The Commercial Appeal* web forum would rise to the same deliberative level as *The Tennessean*, despite *The Tennessean's* efforts to promote a more civil discourse, are unclear, but there are a few possibilities based on past research. First, perhaps the contributors of *The Commercial Appeal* website have more invested in the discussion than contributors of past anonymous political discussion sites. In its heyday, Usenet, the subject of much of the early research on computer-mediated communication, was so free-wheeling that Burnett and Bonnici (2003) called it "a sort of Wild



West of cyberspace” (p. 337). Promoting the anything-goes atmosphere in Usenet were the facts that it was free of cost, no user could be banned from it, no registration was required and no real names were required (Freelon, 2012). In the case of *The Commercial Appeal*, contributors not only have to register, but their comments can be removed and they have paid a subscription for the privilege to be able to comment on the site. So they do have a vested interest in the coherence, as well as the liveliness, of the discussion. In addition, the reputations of Usenet, as well as today’s partisan online discussion spaces similar to it, are likely to draw contributors interested in the most contentious discussion available. A newspaper web forum, with its link to the media’s historical mission of objective reporting and truth-telling, may not draw as many contributors who are only interested in contentious, antinormative discussion. As previously mentioned in the liberal individualist section, years of comment moderation on the site may also have influenced the discussion toward more deliberation. “The common assumption... is that in order for deliberative democracy to flourish, participants need to be closely managed,” wrote Freelon (2012, p. 58).



## CHAPTER VII

## Deliberate Individualism and Its Practical Implications

In his analysis of 1,752 comments from The Seattle Times and The Washington Post, Freelon (2012) found even lower levels of communitarian characteristics (0.4% to 1%) and much higher levels of liberal individualist characteristics (monologues appeared in 85% of the comments) than the current analysis. Freelon categorized his newspaper web forums as liberal individualist with a strong stream of deliberation running through the comments, evidenced most strongly by the 51% of nondirected rational-critical arguments and 24.8% of nondirected deliberative questions. Freelon called this mix of liberal individualism and deliberation “deliberative individualism,” noting that “the openness of the newspaper comment submission mechanism seems to have allowed both democratic norms to flourish” (p. 116). In the current analysis, an even more balanced distribution of liberal individualist and deliberative quantifiers was found (41% and 43% for all liberal individualist characteristics combined and 46% and 47% for all deliberative characteristics combined), with the deliberative characteristics taking the lead. Unlike Freelon’s analysis, a majority of the deliberative characteristics were found within the 152 responses, showing much more reciprocity. This comparison supports the notion that shared geographic ties and civic interest of local contributors motivates them to seriously interact and debate the policies and issues directly related to their lives. Posters on a national forum could potentially live on opposite sides of the nation, and thus may have far less interest in what another commenter has to say, much less in

responding to it, as it may not relate to their specific civic environment or lifestyle.

Noting that insults may provide a more negative effect on deliberation than reasonable talk has a positive effect, Freelon (2012) suggests that for those looking to move their online discussion toward deliberation, they should use technological affordances designed to “remove the insults and the pre-existing deliberation is able to shine through uncontaminated” (p. 123). This appears to be what newspapers are trying to do by applying social media formats to their online comment forums. However, this analysis seems to indicate that stronger methods may be required than simply removing the negativity. *The Tennessean* web forum uses comment moderation, user identification and social metadata to remove negativity, and while these methods have produced a largely civil environment (with only 10% insults compared to the 36.8% Freelon found in 2012), they have not produced any more deliberation than found on *The Commercial Appeal* forum, which has managed to evolve the same civil environment and deliberation level without the technological affordances.

So what do these two forums have in common that would make them more deliberative than other web forums, but not any more deliberative than each other? Perhaps it is because, unlike many of the other publications recently studied, they both draw local readers specifically interested in cross-cutting debate on local policies and issues. In today’s day and age, no newshound needs to get news from a local source. The Internet and 24-hour television present national and regional news earlier, more conveniently and digestibly; thus the

reason so many newspapers are in jeopardy. So those citizens still reading, and especially those registering to comment on, newspaper websites are likely particularly interested in a local point of view.

Choi and Young (2010) note “Online discussion participants are not required to draw a conclusion at the end of the discussion... What matters significantly in online discussion communities is how much each participant expresses his or her opinion freely” (p. 27). This is the attitude that brings newspaper web forums their liberal individualist bent. However, if local web contributors already show a tendency toward deliberative discussion, perhaps the way to encourage more deliberation is not to focus on enhancing civility, but to give web contributors a consensus-building goal. Wright and Street (2007) defined deliberative democracy as “Informed discussion between individuals about issues which concern them, leading to some form of consensus and collective decision” (p. 850). The missing link to deliberative discussion in these web forums would seem to be the “consensus and collective decision” element. While it’s unlikely that disparate web contributors citywide would ever actually come together to support a particular solution in one of these newspaper-hosted forums, certainly local readers have a common interest in identifying and refining potential solutions to the local problems that affect their lives. Papacharissi (2004) noted that “conversation specifically aimed at political action” (p. 281) along with universal access and a wide range of topics are needed to “augment the democratic capital that is generated from these online political discussions”(p. 281).

Newsrooms and web designers could partner to provide such conversation of political action in a variety of ways. Editors and publishers could pledge to show the best citizen web comments to city leaders in editorial board meetings. They could investigate and write reports based on the best points made by contributors, or hold live forums discussing questions and issues raised by citizen web contributors. Editors could plan story packages that include online chat sessions with governmental officials and further ability to comment online afterwards. Moderators could use the best web forum comments as seed comments to promote further discussion on Facebook or Twitter. Newspaper web forums currently tend to have little purpose beyond feeding the egos and social needs of those commenting. By providing a civic goal for the contributors to strive for, the discussion could rise to a higher level of debate and deliberation.



## CHAPTER VIII

## Limitations to Study and Future Research Suggestions

This study is very small in scope and was carried out by one coder with no inter-coder reliability test. Therefore it should not be generalized and further research would be needed to validate these results. By including a wide range of political topics, as opposed to focusing on one thread or one topic area, this study was able to get an overall view of political discourse on a newspaper-hosted web forum. However, the approach made measuring opinion diversity among the non-directed comments and some responses very difficult, as many were somewhat off-topic, insulting or not reflective of a specific issue stance. As the discussion of the more-communitarian Memphis pension plan thread shows, further study of how discussion changes from one topic to the next within a newspaper-hosted web forum could provide interesting insights into how social ties and ideologies affect democratic communication online. Locally-based mass media web forums may be one of the few places online where one group of citizens can be found discussing the nuances of multiple political topics of interest. In the same vein, this study included no provision to include insulting comments that were part of off-topic discussion. Development of a better way to distinguish off-topic comments vs. personal attacks, so that they could be included in the data, would allow for more realistic measurement of the deliberative vs. the liberal individualist characteristics in online discourse. Finally, this study specifically avoided looking at the conversation on the news product as a whole, selecting only articles on civic issues for coding. As newspapers include a wide range of

content from government to entertainment, an interesting topic for future research could be to look at which types of stories actually get the most discussion on newspaper web forums and what do those results say about the public's interest in civic issues.

As Choi and Young (2010) note in their study, an analysis of online discourse reveals almost nothing about the backgrounds of the contributors, which could have a major effect on the nature of the discourse in a particular web forum. Demographic surveys of who actually uses these sites and their ideological leanings could also be very enlightening. While the Pew Center (2011) reports that the numbers of people reading newspaper websites are very small, the data in this analysis indicates they are very devoted. Many of the collected comments indicate the contributors have thoroughly read the story they are commenting on, and some of these contributors have been commenting on the same newspaper web forum for multiple years. A clearer picture of who these contributors are would help editors and publishers understand how to keep them as customers and maximize or engage their strong civic interests. Another approach to this analysis that could be pursued in the future is that similar to Halpern and Gibbs (2013), looking not just at whether a rational-critical argument was provided, but also the length of comments, their complexity (multiple sentences, use of semi-colons, lists), use of external sources and considering how rational proposed arguments are. This analysis did not include a proactive definition for a "civil" comment, instead defining a civil environment by default as the lack of insults. Most past

research seems to have focused on how uncivil behavior hampers deliberation.

Future studies could explore how and to what extent civil behavior enhances deliberation.

## CHAPTER IX

## Conclusion

The fact that the debate rages among journalists, scholars and contributors about how to make mass media web forums more civil and more deliberative is a testament to the fact that these web forums are seen as a valuable place to be exposed to a diversity of civic opinion and a higher quality of debate than can be found on partisan sites or unmoderated discussion sites. Surveys have shown that newspaper web forum contributors like participating on them and that many of the participants prefer them to remain anonymous (Rosenberry, 2011). So newspapers which are not only interested in fulfilling their traditional role to nurture an informed citizenry but also in serving their customers in order to make a profit, should carefully consider policies to move to non-anonymous comments. The results of this study indicate that local newspaper web forums hold great potential to be thriving deliberative discussion sites, but that merely removing source anonymity may not necessarily achieve the desired goal. To become fully deliberative, free of the harsher characteristics of liberal individualism, it will take more than an adoption of SNS technology. Social metadata and identification are not enough to turn a virtual sounding board into a virtual community.

Just two decades ago, many journalism leaders were heralding the promise of civic journalism (now called public journalism) (Witt, 2004) saying that its combination of writing news in a more engaging way and activity involving citizens in story development would “revive democracy” (Rutigliano, 2007). But now that public journalism has evolved into “the public’s journalism” (Witt,



2004, p. 55) through citizen-founded blogs, digital native publications and news aggregators, newspapers seem to have forgotten that many of those engaging practices of public journalism can easily be applied to the website news forums they already have sitting at the end of every story posted. Instead, they want to sit back and let contributors set the tone for the forums, which past experience and past research has shown more often than not leads to less than democratic communication. Freelon's (2012) analysis shows that using nothing but a well-designed web technology can produce deliberative discussion, but perhaps even greater results would be achieved if newspapers used their many resources and connections to provide a mutual goal for forum contributors. Active engagement with the forum audience through activities such as real-time, actively moderated forums, thoughtful seed questions linked to the news coverage or incorporating forum comments into coverage could provide a goal to move the participants' overall discussion toward a form of consensus and thus enhance deliberation. In order to serve as a public sphere for democratic discussion, newspapers can no longer simply report the news. They cannot even merely sit back and invite comment. They must instead actively engage the public to converse about the news or they may find themselves no longer relevant in today's digital society.

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## Appendix

### Freelon's Quantifiers of Online Democratic Communication

| Model   | Quantifier               | Definition  |
|---|--------------------------|---|
| <b>Liberal Individualist</b><br>"Stresses the rational individual's potential for self-actualization and-expression, and thus privileges those priorities above the collective." <sup>1</sup> | Monologue                | "Messages that do not explicitly address other participants." <sup>2</sup>  |
|   | Personal revelation      | "Disclosure of information about oneself in a public forum." <sup>3</sup>   |
|   | Personal showcase        | "Participants may also use online forums as advertising platforms for content they have created apart from the forum itself." <sup>4</sup>        |
|   | Flaming                  | "Comments that denote a marked lack of concern for the feelings and beliefs of others." <sup>5</sup>  |
| <b>Communitarian</b><br>"The cultivation of social cohesion and group identity above the fulfillment of individual desires." <sup>6</sup>   | Ideological homophily    | "The tendency of citizens to assemble themselves into politically homogenous collectives that rarely if ever engage with outsiders." <sup>7</sup> |
|   | Mobilization             | "All messages that advocate for some political action." <sup>8</sup>  |
|   | Community identification | "The extent to which participants view themselves as members of a community." <sup>9</sup>  |



| <b>Model</b>  | <b>Quantifier</b>             | <b>Definition</b>   |
|---|-------------------------------|---|
|   | Intra-ideological response    | Responses to contributors who are in agreement.   |
|   | Intra-ideological questioning | Honest questions directed to contributors who are in agreement.                                       |
| <b>Deliberative</b><br>“Deliberation... entails a willingness to engage with challenging opinions in good faith.” <sup>10</sup> | Rational-critical argument    | “The presentation of reasons in defense of political positions.” <sup>11</sup>                        |
|   | Public issue focus            | “Discussions primarily pertain to issues traditionally considered political.” <sup>12</sup>           |
|   | Equality                      | “The extent to which forum contributions are spread evenly among participants.” <sup>13</sup>         |
|   | Discussion topic focus        | “The extent to which posts within discussion threads address the initial thread topic.” <sup>14</sup> |
|   | Inter-ideological response    | Responses to contributors who are in disagreement.  |
|   | Inter-ideological questioning | Honest questions to contributors who are in disagreement.   |

Notes on page 90.

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